

with skin intact and altered souls

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by [romanticallyinept](#)

Summary

“Many travelers feel nervous about accepting rides for the same reason,” Hannibal says. “There is uncertainty on both sides of the equation. I have no way of knowing if you’re dangerous, just as you have no way of knowing if I’m, say—” He hesitates, licking his lips, and pushes the envelope. “A serial killer, for example.”

Will snorts his laughter, shifting to tuck his hands under his arms. “Come on,” he says, turning his head to look over at Hannibal. “The chances of two serial killers being in one car would be *astronomical*.”

Inspired by the tweet. You know the one.
With accompanying [soundtrack](#).

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It isn't often that Hannibal drives just for the sake of driving. He's not prone to flights of fancy, and usually, if it's three in the morning and he finds himself awake, he'll work, or read, or flip through his rolodex of business cards and plan his next meal.

Rarely, he'll get dressed and grab his keys and go for a drive.

Daylight reminds Hannibal of what Bedelia calls his 'person-suit', a facade presented to those observing to make them feel safer in their own skins. Without the mask of daylight to soften its bite, the world is harsh and cold and cruel, more predator than prey. He likes it better that way. He never feels the need to hide from the night.

For the most part, Hannibal keeps to the back roads, and usually he doesn't encounter anyone else on his witching-hour excursions. If he does come across another living soul, they're always tucked away behind a pair of headlights, there and gone again in the span of a few even breaths.

And then, one night, he spots a hitchhiker on the side of the road.

The man is walking slowly, opposite the way Hannibal is driving, one arm thrust out at his side with his hand in a thumbs-up gesture. As the shape of him grows clearer in the dim glow of Hannibal's headlights, he sees the man's shoulders are hunched under the weight of a backpack. He raises his head as Hannibal's car approaches, revealing the shadow of facial hair across his chin and jaw, thick, but not unkempt.

For a moment, Hannibal considers stopping to offer his assistance. It's a terrible place to be hitchhiking – Hannibal's been driving for close to twenty minutes and he hasn't seen another car – and the man has at least seven miles to go before he reaches anything like a main road. It's cold, and he does try to make an effort not to be rude, when given the opportunity.

Then his car passes the man, even as Hannibal is shifting his foot to the brake, and the upwards-facing thumb flips to a middle finger.

Hannibal's decision to restock his freezer is one that's much easier to make.

The road is narrow, but the Bentley manages the turn, sliding comfortably into the other lane at Hannibal's direction. In the glow of the headlights he can see that the hitchhiker has stopped and is watching him, waiting for him, both hands now hooked in the straps of his backpack. He rocks back on his heels, impatience practically dripping off him, and Hannibal feels a familiar ease settle in his shoulders.

This one has been practically gift-wrapped. At this point, it would be rude to walk away.

He pulls up in front of the hitchhiker and rolls down his window, leaning out just far enough to be seen. He's aware of what he looks like, and more than one long pig has severely underestimated the soft, middle-aged man they found themselves at the mercy of. Hannibal, when he doesn't want to, doesn't look like a dangerous man.

"I see you're in need of a lift," he says. "Is there somewhere in particular you're headed?"

The man flashes him a smile and ducks his head in what appears to be gentle embarrassment. Hannibal pauses, letting his eyes wander over the rest of the hitchhiker's frame, taking in his body language – but no, there's nothing alarming. He's not holding himself stiffly, like there's a gun stuffed into the small of his back, and he's not showing signs of any nervous tics, like there's adrenaline slowly flooding his system in anticipation of an altercation.

Uncertainty, then. Hannibal's expression relaxes into an easy smile. There is always the risk of encountering another personality like his in situations like these, but Hannibal's quick to dismiss that possibility. There's too much *awkward* in the way the man is holding himself, too much of a genuine flush to his cheeks.

Some things can't be faked.

"I just need to make it into Baltimore proper," the hitchhiker says in a gentle Southern drawl, finally looking up at Hannibal through a fringe of gently flouncing curls. "Sorry for, you know." He waves one hand, the one he used to flip Hannibal off when he drove past. "I've been walking for a while."

Hannibal nods in acknowledgement. "Perfectly understandable. Come, get in. It's a short enough drive back."

He gets flashed another grin for his troubles, and then the man jogs over to the other side of the car. Hannibal watches as he shrugs off his backpack and then opens the door, folding himself into the passenger seat before tucking the backpack between his legs. "Thanks," he says, his voice just a little breathless as he closes the door behind him. "I really appreciate it. I'm, uh, I'm Will, by the way."

Hannibal eases the car back up to speed, watching the hitchhiker, Will, out of the corner of his eye. He looks... small is the word Hannibal settles on, even though he's aware it's entirely a matter of his perception. Will has made himself *look* small, slouching in the seat and pulling his knees up as far as they'll go, resting his feet on his backpack.

"Hannibal." Reaching out, Hannibal flicks the heater on and gestures towards the vents. "Feel free to adjust if you're cold, Will."

Will reaches out gloved fingers and nudges one of the vents to blow air towards him, and then shivers slightly before settling back into the curled-up ball he's apparently decided on. "Thanks," he says again. "Most people won't stop for a hitchhiker anymore. Too 'dangerous.'" He pairs the word with air quotes and undisguised disgust in his voice. Hannibal feels his lips curling into a wry smile.

“Many travelers feel nervous about accepting rides for the same reason,” he says. “There is uncertainty on both sides of the equation. I have no way of knowing if you’re dangerous, just as you have no way of knowing if I’m, say—” He hesitates, licking his lips, and pushes the envelope. “A serial killer, for example.”

Will snorts his laughter, shifting to tuck his hands under his arms. “Come on,” he says, turning his head to look over at Hannibal. “The chances of two serial killers being in one car would be *astronomical*.”

Hannibal hears the words, and he registers them, but they’re not what causes alarm to flare, bright and warbling, in the pit of his stomach.

He feels the shift before he sees it, feels the presence next to him change from something small and harmless to something coiled and predatory. His fingers tighten around the steering wheel as he grits his teeth, and then, when he’s confident he’s not going to send them barreling off the side of the road, he glances over at Will.

He should have *seen*. He’s looked at killers before and known them the moment they stood before him, understood their motivations after a few stilted words of formal conversation. Like recognizes like, and there’s no way around it. Or, rather, he thought there wasn’t. Clearly, there’s something he’s missing, because the version of Will who stood on the road outside his car was soft and withdrawn and demure, without a trace of aggression in his expression.

The Will that’s draped across his passenger seat now has ice behind his eyes and the promise of violence in the lines of his body. It’s a different man wearing the same skin, and if they were in the light of day, sat across from each other in Hannibal’s office, he wouldn’t hesitate to give his diagnosis. Personality disorders, when they present themselves, are obvious things.

But in the small hours of the morning, in the Bentley, Hannibal finds himself hesitating, because there had been something familiar about Will’s soft, rounded edges, and the ease with which he threw them away.

Hannibal’s person-suit has been carefully constructed, stitched together with care over years and years of careful trial and observation. It’s bespoke, custom, made just for him, but under scrutiny it falls apart because, after all, it’s just a fake. A forgery. The version of himself that Hannibal presents to the world has never been more than ruse.

Will’s shroud hadn’t been fake. Hannibal would have been able to see through it if it was. It had been real, but not... not *Will’s* real.

Will hadn’t crafted his own person-suit. He’d just borrowed someone else’s.

What do you call a shapeshifter who keeps his skin and changes his soul? Hannibal wonders idly, and his mental rolodex quietly crosses out Will’s name.

Hannibal hums, flexing his fingers and forcing the tension to ease out of his shoulders. “Astronomical,” he agrees. “Not impossible, I’m afraid.”

Will freezes, and Hannibal half-expects to see a flash of silver in his peripheral vision, but there's nothing. Will doesn't try to attack him, doesn't try to gain the upper hand over the person who, ostensibly, has just become his biggest threat. Instead, he just *laughs*, soft and bright and utterly delighted.

"I wasn't ever going to hitch another ride, was I?"

He says it like he knows Hannibal has changed his mind, and Hannibal sees no point in trying to pretend he hasn't. "My dear boy, the last thing you would have seen would have been the inside of this car."

Will shifts, sitting up and turning to face Hannibal completely, crossing his legs underneath himself. He's not wearing a seatbelt – if Hannibal slammed on the brakes, Will would shatter the Bentley's windshield with his skull. Hannibal purposely doesn't think about why he eases off the gas, just a little bit, and brings their speed down.

"I think introductions are in order," Will says, and when Hannibal glances over he sees the ice in Will's gaze has been replaced with a quiet fire. It blazes, hot and low and dangerous, and Hannibal finds himself, despite his better judgment, intrigued. "Real introductions, I mean. *Hannibal* doesn't tell me what you planned on doing with me."

The sound of his name in Will's low, even rumble makes the hairs on the back of Hannibal's neck stand up. Every instinct he has is screaming that this man is dangerous, that Hannibal needs to proceed with caution, but for the first time in a long time Hannibal is fascinated by something other than his own work.

"The newspapers are terribly dramatic," he says, though he feels the corner of his mouth twisting up even as he does so. "They've dubbed me 'The Chesapeake Ripper.'"

Silence descends over the front seat of the Bentley, and Hannibal finds himself idly wondering if that will be a step too far for the strange creature in his passenger seat. Serial killer? Acceptable. Serial killer who is suspected of harvesting and eating parts of his victims? Now that's just too much. But Will doesn't pull away from him, doesn't recoil in poorly-concealed disgust. He just hums, consideringly, and glances out the windshield towards the road.

"I should probably buy a lottery ticket," he muses, almost to himself. Then, louder, he says, "You have been on my list for a long, long time."

Hannibal raises an eyebrow, waiting. Will doesn't strike him as the vigilante type, the sort of killer to temper his own thirsts by going after others who are cut from the same cloth, but Will has also proven himself difficult to read. Hannibal refrains from jumping to any conclusions, at least for the moment.

"Should I be flattered or menaced by my inclusion on this list of yours?"

"They do say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery."

“‘That mediocrity can pay to greatness.’ That is the rest of the phrase.” Hannibal pauses.
“You don’t seem very mediocre, Will.”

Will rolls his eyes. “Yeah, I know. Everyone tends to forget that part.” He sighs. “But if it makes the FBI feel better to insult me while they chase their tails trying to catch me, well, the least I can do is lean into it, even if it’s in poor taste.”

“Do you have trouble with taste?”

Hannibal barely hears Will’s breathless little laugh over the sound of the Bentley’s engine.
“My thoughts are often not *tasty*.”

“Nor mine,” Hannibal murmurs, swallowing as his mouth suddenly floods with saliva. “They think you imitate?”

“*Imitation* is the closest they’re going to get to comprehension.”

“Associations come quickly.”

This time, Will’s grin is sharp. “So does flattery.”

For a long moment, Hannibal says nothing at all, letting his observations order themselves in his mind. Will is... unique, unlike anyone Hannibal has encountered before, and that makes him hesitant. The inability to predict how someone will react to him is both refreshing and terrifying, all at once.

“They call me the Mimic,” Will says, after a breath. “When they’re aware that I exist.”

Hannibal has heard of him, of course. Jack Crawford has called him in to consult on a number of suspected serial killer cases (including, to Hannibal’s quiet delight, two Ripper cases), and during the course of those investigations a variety of names have come up.

The Mimic bothers Jack, for the same reason the Ripper does – he has no signature, no distinguishable pattern of behavior, no *type*. When his crime scenes are all but carbon copies of those of other killers, it’s nearly impossible to get a read on him.

“What you have is pure empathy, isn’t it? You can assume anyone’s point of view, put on and take off other mindsets like an article of clothing.”

Will’s eyes narrow. “Uh huh. What is it exactly that you do for a living, Hannibal?”

“I used to be a surgeon.”

“And now?”

Hannibal sighs. “And now I practice psychiatry.”

Will makes a disgusted noise, shoving himself back into the seat. “Don’t *psychoanalyze* me,” he mutters. “You won’t like me when I’m psychoanalyzed.”

He speaks from experience, that much is clear. Hannibal wonders how much of Will's childhood was spent being shuttled between different doctors in an effort to determine what was *wrong* with him. He wonders if any of them ever stumbled on the truth, on the nature of the uncomfortable gift Will had been granted.

He looks at Will again, at the rough edges he's no longer hiding, and thinks that, just as likely, there wasn't anyone around to care enough to notice there was something unusual about him until it was far, far too late to do anything about it.

"I'm sorry, Will," Hannibal offers, surprised by the sincerity in his own voice. "I can't shut mine off any more than you can shut yours off."

There's a pause, and then Will sighs. "So, what, you really just sit in a chair all day and ask people *so how does that make you feel?*"

"Among other things," Hannibal agrees.

"Oh?"

Hannibal turns onto his street, and he lets the silence linger between them for a moment, until the Bentley comes to a stop in the driveway. If Will notices that they're not in Baltimore proper, if he has an issue with it, he doesn't mention it. He just sits there, waiting, once again sprawled over Hannibal's passenger seat in an egregious display of ownership he hasn't even begun to earn.

From anybody else, the behavior would be unforgivably rude. From Will, it's oddly... charming. An exception. Hannibal has the feeling he'll be making a lot of exceptions where Will is concerned.

"On occasion," Hannibal says, "I also consult for the FBI."

Will shifts abruptly, and Hannibal tenses in preparation to defend himself, but all the younger man does is tug off his gloves and lean across the center console. He reaches out to cup Hannibal's cheek, far more gently than the doctor anticipated, and turns Hannibal's head until they're facing each other, eyes meeting, blood-speckled-hazel aligning with cold blue.

"Oh," Will says, and he sounds... reverent, almost. His eyes flick over Hannibal's face, taking him in, and then, just for a moment, they flutter shut, and the hand that's pressed up against Hannibal's cheek slides to the back of his neck.

"Oh," Will repeats. "Oh, that's *beautiful*."

His voice has changed, ever so slightly. There's a lilt to it that wasn't there before, a softening of his consonants that Hannibal is intimately familiar with.

Hannibal shifts, trying to turn himself a little more towards the other man, and Will's fingernails abruptly dig into the back of his neck, hard and merciless. "Don't move," Will murmurs. "Don't... don't move. Right now I can't help but feel like you're about to run away."

“And why do you think that is?”

Will gives him a breathless little laugh in response, his fingers twitching and flexing. Hannibal feels blood welling up in the grooves Will’s fingernails left in his skin, and he wonders how Will will react to having Hannibal’s blood on him, when he’s back to being himself.

“Everyone is prey to you, aren’t they?” Will isn’t looking at him anymore, but Hannibal can still see the gentle curve of his mouth, the flutter of eyelashes against his cheeks. He’s smiling to himself, reveling in what he’s feeling. “Prey runs. You don’t have to worry about rustling in the bushes when you’re at the top of the food chain, when you know everything in the shadows will run away from you instead of towards you.”

“One could argue the FBI is at the top of this particular food chain,” Hannibal replies. This earns him another laugh, sharper this time.

“And you’re right there every time they get close, aren’t you? Steering them just enough off-track to keep yourself safe. Fucking *brilliant*.” Will shakes his head, and his fingers smooth out over the back of Hannibal’s neck, smearing blood in their wake. “And then... and then you go out and take these... these *pigs* and... and you elevate them into art,” he finishes, whispering now. “That’s what they haven’t realized yet, isn’t it? The displays aren’t really for you. They’re for *them*. Allowing them to be far more in death than they could have ever been in life. A transformation. A *becoming*.”

With a soft, amused little sound, Will drags his hand back to Hannibal’s cheek, leaving sticky smears of blood wherever his fingers brush against skin. As Hannibal watches, Will’s demeanor changes again, shifting, easing back to the version of himself that had complained about the FBI’s perception of him.

When he speaks again, the South has bled back into his voice. “They’re never gonna catch you,” he says, and then bops Hannibal on the nose with his forefinger. “They’re never gonna catch me either.”

Hannibal lets out a long, slow breath. “We seem to have more in common than either of us realize.”

Will smiles easily, and then flicks his eyes towards Hannibal’s house. “Some differences, too. This your place?”

Hannibal dips his head in acknowledgement.

“You planning on inviting me in?”

Rude boy, Hannibal thinks. *Rude, lovely boy*.

“I’ll make breakfast,” he says, and Will’s smile turns absolutely feral.

there will be more, promise. confident! Will is my favorite Will (<-- see: reasons I'll never be over the fact that we didn't get to see him fully come into his own in season 4.)

also no I did not spend far more time than necessary debating Will's serial killer name, why do you ask?

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

“You enjoy presenting yourself as the weaker party,” Hannibal says quietly, watching Will’s eyes dart over to him in the dim light. “Playing at submission, as it were.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Will perches at Hannibal’s counter comfortably, like he’s spent dozens of mornings there, watching Hannibal cook with open curiosity. His backpack is on the floor between the legs of the barstool he’s sitting on, and his fingers are wrapped around a glass mug of coffee that he’s holding carefully, like it’s something precious.

Judging by the dark smudges Hannibal can see under Will’s eyes, he thinks that caffeine might be something precious indeed.

Hannibal wasn’t expecting company, but he cooks for himself every day, and a protein scramble is a simple recipe to double. Will watches, silently, and doesn’t comment until Hannibal lays a few sausages in a hot pan, which immediately starts to sizzle.

“I take it you don’t make many trips to the butcher?”

The corner of Hannibal’s mouth twitches up. “I am very careful about what I put into my body, Will. More often than not that entails curing my own meats and stuffing my own sausages.”

Will laughs softly, taking a sip of his coffee. “I’ll admit, I don’t have a very refined palate, so any subtleties might be wasted on me. But that smells amazing.”

Hannibal glances up, taking in the easy set of Will’s shoulders, the calm, almost sleepy expression on his face. He’s relaxed, truly, half-asleep in a cannibal’s kitchen with the scent of frying human flesh filling his nose. *Strange boy*, Hannibal thinks. *Strange, lovely boy.*

Hannibal finishes cooking in a comfortable silence, feeling Will’s watchful gaze on him like a physical thing, but every time he looks up Will is either staring lovingly at his slowly emptying mug of coffee, or looking around Hannibal’s kitchen with poorly-disguised interest. He only gets the younger man’s attention back fully when he sets a steaming plate in front of him and sets a fork down on the counter next to it.

“Under normal circumstances I’d insist on dining at the table,” Hannibal says as he draws up a second stool next to Will. “These, however, are far from normal circumstances.”

Will picks up his fork and stabs a piece of sausage with it. “What, you don’t make a habit of bringing hitchhikers home in the middle of the night?” he asks, and then pops the piece of sausage in his mouth.

As a rule, Hannibal enjoys observing as people eat the food he makes. There’s a visceral sort of pleasure that comes from watching as his guests unknowingly indulge in what they would consider the gravest of cultural taboos, and then proceed to thank him for allowing them the opportunity.

There’s a different sort of pleasure that comes from watching Will eat the food he’s made, knowing exactly where it came from and how it came to be there, without an ounce of hesitation.

Will swallows, hums, and smiles at him, sweet and lazy. “That’s delicious. Thank you, Hannibal.”

“My pleasure.”

Will pauses with a forkful of eggs halfway to his mouth. He cocks his head, his eyes roving over Hannibal’s face the same way they had in the car right before he slipped Hannibal’s persona on over his own like a well-worn coat. There’s no adjustment this time, no shift – Will’s gaze remains his own, intense and electric, but entirely him.

“Huh,” he says, almost like he’s talking to himself. “I wondered, you know. I’ve only seen pictures of the scenes you create – Tattle-Crime’s reporting is speculative fiction at best, but Lounds’ photos are unbeatable. Still, it’s harder to do what I do from a picture.”

“You can read crime scenes?”

Will eats another bite, and then raises his hand in a ‘so-so’ gesture. “I can step inside the people who make them. Feel what they were feeling in the moment. Walk through the steps they took and understand *why* they did what they did.” He flashes Hannibal a grin. “But like I said, it’s harder to do that from a picture. I only ever really got bits and pieces from your tableaux.”

“That’s more than most can say,” Hannibal offers. “What did you wonder?”

“Which part got you off.”

Hannibal pauses and takes a breath, waiting for the all-too familiar rush of annoyance. He’s sat through too many of Crawford and company’s bumbling expositions on his supposed motives, on the psychological profile they’ve decided best fits the Chesapeake Ripper. He’d had higher hopes for Will, thought that perhaps he’d found a true kindred spirit.

But the annoyance never comes, because, he realizes, Will must know. Will looked at him and stepped so cleanly into his point of view that it had almost been like looking into a mirror. He wouldn’t have stumbled over something as *inane* as this, not if he understood about prey and pigs and *becoming*.

The very least he can do is hear the boy out, he decides. He can always change his mind about dealing with Will's rudeness later, if he proves to be rude *and* incorrect. "And what conclusions have you come to?"

Will clicks his tongue. "I could have looked at your masterpieces day in and day out and probably never *truly* understood, even if I'd been allowed to walk through them. The murders aren't the *point*. And don't misunderstand me – you clearly take pride in your work, in a job well done. There's a certain amount of satisfaction that comes from a clean kill you get away with. But they're really just the prep work for the real deal, aren't they?"

Through sheer force of will, Hannibal keeps his grip on his fork loose and natural. He's not used to being seen, not in any ways that truly matter, but Will seems to slip past the defenses he's built up like they're not there at all.

"Anyway," Will continues, "the murders aren't the important part. *This* is the important part." He stabs another piece of sausage and slides it into his mouth, humming softly. This one he savors, letting a small, barely-there smile play out over his lips before he swallows. "Feeding yourself is the ritual, the necessity. Feeding *others* is the power play. That's what you get off on."

Hannibal swallows around a throat that's suddenly dry and tight. "That's a bold assumption to make."

"Not an assumption." Will's eyes flick over to Hannibal as he takes a sip of his coffee. "You haven't taken your eyes off me since I started eating. And you're doing an admirable job of controlling your breathing and heart rates, but there's not a whole lot you can do for the dilation of your pupils. You like this. A lot."

He pauses, and his eyes dart down to where his hand is wrapped around his mug. As Hannibal watches, Will slowly uncurls his fingers, flexing them once before holding the back of his hand up in front of his face. Even from his position across the counter, Hannibal can see what Will is looking at – Hannibal's blood, now dark and dried, smeared across the tips of his fingers.

"You didn't tell me I hurt you."

"That's because you didn't."

Will raises one eyebrow, turning his hand so Hannibal can see the blood under his fingernails. "I drew blood."

Hannibal sips at his own coffee, watching Will watch his own hand. "It bothers you."

Will hums, and then shakes his head. "It bothers me that I don't remember doing it," he says. "I remember telling you not to move. I remember watching the pulse fluttering in your throat and thinking how easy it would be to tear out your jugular with my teeth. I remember *anticipating* the taste of blood, not because it meant killing but because it meant taking a part of you inside of me."

He stops, turning to look at Hannibal. “You are a very interesting man,” he says, and then slips his index finger into his mouth.

Something twists low in Hannibal’s stomach, fierce and hot and heady, a black fire that licks up his spine and makes the tiny crescent-shaped wounds on the back of his neck pulse in time with the beating of his heart. The very nature of what he does is intimate, and he’s always acknowledged that, but watching Will lick his blood off his finger is a singular style of intimacy all its own.

Will slides his finger out of his mouth with a soft pop. “Point me in the direction of the bathroom?”

Hannibal gestures at the hallway, and forces the flames not to burst out of his throat when he speaks. “Second door on your right.”

Will flashes him a quick, bright smile as he hops off the barstool, and Hannibal wonders what that smile would look like dripping in blood. He wonders how amenable Will would be in assisting him in finding out.

While Will washes the rest of Hannibal’s blood off his hands in the washroom, Hannibal clears up the mess from breakfast, packing away Will’s leftovers and scrubbing down the dishes and pans by hand. By the time he finishes and reaches for a towel to dry his hands, Will still hasn’t returned.

Hannibal makes his way down the hallway and finds the bathroom door ajar, but the room inside is empty. There are water droplets in the sink, and the hand towel hanging next to the medicine cabinet is crooked – Will was there, but he’s not anymore.

Walking down to the end of the hallway, Hannibal pauses in the doorway to his study. Will is there, hands in the pockets of his faded jeans, looking at one of the bookshelves lining the walls. He glances back over his shoulder when Hannibal steps into the room, the curls on his forehead bouncing gently.

“Just browsing,” he says. “I haven’t read *The Iliad* since high school. Your copy is much nicer than the dog-eared paperback our library had.”

Hannibal takes a few steps closer, until he’s standing behind Will, close enough to smell the scent of cheap aftershave and old sweat. Will looks up at him, something dark glittering behind his eyes, before his focus turns back to the bookcase.

“Are you seeking out similarities between us, Will, or merely stumbling upon them?”

Will laughs quietly. “You’re the psychiatrist. You know better than I do that capture bonding is a perfectly reasonable response to certain stressful situations. You bond with your new master, you survive. You don’t, you’re breakfast.”

For a moment, Hannibal thinks Will is going to ask *who* breakfast had been, but he doesn’t. He just turns, meandering his way over to Hannibal’s desk. His hands stay in his pockets, even though his interest is clearly piqued by the cluster of drawings near the edge of it.

“Is that what you consider me, Will? Your captor?”

Blue eyes flick up, and Will raises one eyebrow. “Anyone looking in would say this power imbalance swings heavily in your favor. You have age, experience, and status on me.”

Finally, one of Will’s hands leaves his pockets, the tips of his fingers dragging over one of the bleach-white skulls perched on the desk. He hums, trailing his fingers out over the horns.

“All I’ve got is what amounts to a halfway-decent party trick.”

Hannibal shifts his attention, narrows his focus. The Will standing before him more closely resembles the Will that stood on the side of the road than anything else Hannibal has seen in the past few hours. He finds the soft, demure persona unsettling, more so than any accidental bloodletting ever will be. “You must attend some interesting parties.”

Will huffs a breath of laughter. “I’m pretty sure you’ve got me beat on that front, too.”

He nudges Hannibal’s chair out from the desk with his foot, and then he all but collapses into it, knees spread obscenely wide and arms thrown over the armrests. Despite being splayed over the piece of furniture, he looks small again, like Hannibal would have no trouble taking him by the throat and pushing him the rest of the way to the floor.

Hannibal thinks that he would encounter some difficulties if he tried.

“You enjoy presenting yourself as the weaker party,” he says quietly, watching Will’s eyes dart over to him in the dim light. “Playing at submission, as it were.”

“Is that what I’m doing?”

“Is it not?”

Will’s smile bares too many teeth for it to be entirely human, for it to be even borderline polite. “It’s not my fault if people look at me and see something fragile,” he says. “Their perceptions aren’t my responsibility.”

It’s fascinating to watch him slip, to watch his edges sharpen and soften as he needs them to. The feral little thing inside him peeks through, every once in a while – Hannibal doubts that very many people would be able to see it, though they would recognize it on a subconscious level and respond with discomfort and unease. A prey response to the predator in the room.

Will’s nature doesn’t cause Hannibal discomfort. But, then again, very little does.

“Perhaps not,” Hannibal allows. “Regardless, you still enjoy it. You said the FBI calls you the Mimic when they’re aware that you exist.” He steps closer to the desk, aware that once again he’s beginning to cage Will in. The last time he did it, Will ducked easily out of his space, and he’s curious to see what pressing the boundary a second time will do.

As he turns the corner of the desk, he spreads out the stack of sketches, drawing Will’s attention to them. “To borrow your phrasing, Will, is that what gets you off? Flying so far under the radar as to not be noticed at all?”

Will’s gaze returns to him, blue eyes sharp. “I like to be seen. Sometimes.”

“You allowed me to see you.”

That earns him another smile, another brief huff of laughter. “I showed you my teeth were just as sharp as yours so that you’d think twice before tearing into me,” Will says. He shifts in his seat, sliding down a little farther, and in the process splays his thighs open a little more. Hannibal’s eyes, drawn to the movement, fall to the apex of those thighs.

At the same time, Hannibal catches a rich, musky scent, and realizes his error. He isn’t caging Will in at all. Will is luring him in, baiting him, and Hannibal’s easy acquiescence is what’s sparked this new shift, this new arousal.

“Oh, I think you showed me a little more than that,” he murmurs, his voice a little lower, a little rougher than it was a moment before. *What a cunning boy you are, Will.*

Will scoffs, but his eyes stay fixed on Hannibal. “I’ve shown you a lot more than that at this point. I think we’ve both made some exceptions for each other in that regard.”

“I find myself doing little but making exceptions for you.” Hannibal takes another step forward, stopping in between Will’s spread knees – a nudge and they would be touching. The last time they touched, Will drew blood from him, and the past makes the future seem weighted, somehow, like the next time their bodies come into contact with each other could start a storm or a fire or other equally destructive natural disaster.

He won’t close the gap. He’ll wait for Will.

“Maybe we’re both trying to engender a little bonding,” Will suggests. He glances down at where Hannibal’s leg is almost knocking against his own, and then, slowly, drags his eyes up Hannibal’s body. “It wouldn’t do to burn any bridges until the pecking order has been well and truly established.”

Hannibal’s mouth twists into a smile. “Are you uncertain which of us is the dominant personality?”

“Are you?” Will fires back. He matches Hannibal’s smile, though, taking some of the bite out of his words. “I find it interesting that you asked if I considered you my captor. You could have just as easily asked if I considered you my master.”

“I try not to ask questions I already know the answer to, unless I think the answer will be especially illuminating.”

Will dips his head in acknowledgement, and then, abruptly, he shifts, bringing his knees together and hooking his feet behind Hannibal’s ankles. As far as traps go, it’s a flimsy one, but Hannibal can feel the heat of Will’s skin through the fabric of their pants, can feel the way the muscles in his legs flex to hold Hannibal in place. “Master’s not the right word, anyway,” Will says, bringing his hands up to steeple on his chest. He smiles, though this one doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “Like you said, I only play at submission.”

Will plays at a lot of things, Hannibal thinks. He’s playing *Hannibal* right now, testing boundaries, pushing buttons, seeing what Hannibal will let him get away with. They’re new

to each other, after all. When dancing with someone dangerous, it's best to know where all those sharp edges lie, and that's what the two of them are doing: mapping every sharp edge they can find to lessen the chances of slicing themselves open later on.

"Is there a better word for what I am to you, Will?" Hannibal asks.

"How do you feel about *patron*?"

Hannibal hesitates. He's familiar with the word, knows it well enough to be aware of the multiple connotations it carries. The 21st century would have a different word for it, given the way Will is looking up at him with want in his eyes and arousal that he isn't bothering to hide, but Will used *patron* for a reason.

"How does my patronage look to you?"

Will licks his lips. "Nothing you don't already want to do. You feed me. You house me. You share all the little dark pieces of yourself that you can't show anyone else with me."

"Patronage is a two-way street, Will."

"You've seen my work," Will says dismissively. "You know the quality of art you'll be getting in return."

Distantly, Hannibal thinks he should refuse. He should send Will away – or try to, at least. He's under no illusions that a rejection, here and now, would do anything other than spell a bloody end for one or both of them. But allowing Will to stay, encouraging him to continue his activities as the Mimic here in Baltimore, that presents another set of risks entirely.

The thoughts are just that, though. Distant. Faint. Unimportant. Hannibal dismisses them even as they pass through his mind, because while Jack Crawford is an above-average FBI agent, Hannibal and Will are apex predators. There is no world where the FBI bests them, not without them allowing it to happen.

"The guest room is upstairs," he says, "across from the master bedroom."

Will makes a soft, happy sound, and the vice-tight grasp of his legs releases from around Hannibal's shins. "I have a twenty-four hour cancellation policy that applies to me as well as my patients, I'm afraid," Hannibal continues. "I must prepare for the day."

Nodding, Will waves a hand towards the door of the study. "Go get ready," he says. "I'll be here when you get back this afternoon."

Hannibal notes Will's phrasing doesn't make any promises of him *staying* where he's at, but he doesn't mention it. He has the feeling that, whatever Will's planned activities are, he'll be enjoying the benefits soon enough.

this whole fic is just going to be sections of flirty cannibal conversation that start with a line from the show and then just SPIRAL uncontrollably. I'd apologize but I'm not actually sorry.

also I made a [spotify_playlist](#) for inspiration purposes – feel free to check it out if you so desire.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Wind him up, Hannibal thinks, and watch him go.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Leaving Will alone in his home isn't a decision Hannibal makes lightly – it's simply made out of necessity. He can't very well drag the younger man along to his appointments, not without drawing far, far more attention to Will than he's ready to.

He could cancel his appointments. Will, he thinks, is what could broadly be described as a "personal emergency." But a mind like Will's can't flourish under constant observation. By Will's own admission, he likes to be seen *sometimes*. He needs time in the shadows, out of sight, in order to truly thrive. Allowing him that time is a risk Hannibal must take if he wishes to see Will bloom the way he thinks he's capable of.

In any case, the two of them are intertwined; at this point, harm to one means harm to the other. He trusts that Will realizes that as well, trusts in the meticulousness the man demonstrated as the Mimic to safeguard them both.

Hannibal's clients usually aren't terribly fascinating, but as the day wears on he finds himself even less willing to engage than he normally is. His thoughts, when he allows them to, drift to Will. In the palace of his mind Hannibal conjures up the details of every known Mimic case he's been brought in to consult on, and he replays them while aging women discuss their disconnected daughters and middle-class men mourn the death of intimacy in their marriages.

Copycat killers fit a certain psychological profile, people who seek out the attention of strangers because they're unable to acquire enough of it in their personal lives. They think that by tacking their work onto the set list of another killer, they'll be allowed to share in the spotlight.

That profile doesn't fit Will, who, from the hints he's dropped, has been so successful in his mimicry that the FBI hasn't even properly attributed all his kills. If Will wanted to have the media's attention, he would have it. Simple as that. And despite Will's protests - *I like to be seen. Sometimes*. – Hannibal thinks he was right in his assessment. Will is an unconventional killer; conventional profiling methods won't reveal him to the FBI.

Jack Crawford would have a fit over a killer like Will.

Hannibal is still musing when his last appointment of the day arrives.

Franklyn Froideveaux's attachment issues have proven problematic, and under any other circumstances Hannibal would have already severed ties via a referral. But with Franklyn comes Tobias Budge, and while Hannibal hadn't known Will for what he was until Will purposefully pulled back the veil, Hannibal had recognized the emptiness behind Tobias' eyes immediately.

It's grating to hear Franklyn monologue, painful to hear him say *I become you*. Hannibal has seen what that looks like, now, someone *becoming* him – no amount of Franklyn's Googling will make him hold a candle to Will in the passenger seat of Hannibal's Bentley, fingernails digging into the back of his neck, whispering, "*Don't move.*"

Hannibal swallows the sigh that wants to escape his throat. He's used to being alone in the world, to comparing everyone to himself and finding them abysmally lacking. He's not used to having another metric, however. Comparing people to Will nets the same result, of course – the sheep are still sheep – but every reminder that Will is above them is a reminder that he's cut from the same cloth that Hannibal is. He's the one who should be occupying Hannibal's time, not Franklyn Froideveaux.

"Tobias has been saying very dark things," Franklyn offers to the space between them. "Very dark things."

Reluctantly, Hannibal puts away his thoughts of Will. "If they're bothering you, Franklyn, we can talk about them. Perhaps I'll be able to put your mind at rest."

It's a hollow promise. Whatever Tobias has been telling Franklyn, Hannibal has no doubt that it's something the man should be concerned about. But Franklyn nods and settles and leans forward, clasping his hands together, entirely too trusting for his own good.

"He said he wanted to cut someone's throat and play it like a violin."

Hannibal pictures it, wonders, almost immediately, if it would be possible. Surely the tissues would be too soft, too fragile? They would require some sort of treatment to strengthen them. But Tobias, with his years of experience in the string shop, would know exactly how to treat soft, yielding materials in order to make them produce sweet notes when stroked.

"I know it sounds crazy..."

"Psychopaths are not crazy," Hannibal says. "They're fully aware of what they do and the consequences of those actions."

Franklyn nods, digesting that. "Would you diagnose someone like Tobias as a psychopath?" he asks, hesitantly.

Hannibal forces himself to smile. "I cannot diagnose someone based solely on your perception of them. In any case, this hour is about you. My interest in Tobias extends only as far as the effect he's having on your well-being."

Franklyn visibly brightens at that, and Hannibal prepares himself for an irritating hour.

Hannibal has his hand on the Bentley's door when Jack calls. For a moment, he considers ignoring it. He's made no formal promises to Jack Crawford – he consults when he can, and when he can't, or when he doesn't want to, he refuses. But with Franklyn's words still ringing in his ears, he has a feeling that this call will be of particular interest, so he packs himself into the car, and then he answers.

Two minutes later, he starts driving towards the nearest concert hall.

Admittedly, there is a certain morbid artistry to the scene Jack leads Hannibal to. He can see the intent, the melding of man and instrument – Tobias wanted to play his victim. That would have been clear even without Franklyn's timely message. He took great care with the exposure and treatment of the vocal cords, so much so that it makes his disregard for the rest of the body even more blatant. Tobias wasn't interested in arms and legs, so he didn't bother doing anything with them.

It's wasted potential, in Hannibal's opinion. He's certain that's not the reaction Tobias meant to draw from him, but all he feels is vaguely disappointed. Given time, perhaps, and practice, Tobias could perfect his art, could learn to construct his scenes a little more cohesively, but this is his first concerto kill. He chose to put himself in Hannibal's line of sight while still working out his methods. He chose to be impatient.

Hannibal tells Jack his basic observations, leaving Tobias' name out of it. There's no need to get the FBI involved yet. There is still an opportunity to spin this situation into something favorable. Tobias is, after all, the kind of killer the Mimic has targeted before. And while the crime scene he's left is lacking a certain finished quality, it's also complex, detailed, and unique; it would be challenging to replicate with any sort of authenticity, nearly impossible to pass off as the 'real thing.'

Tobias is serenading Hannibal – that much is obvious. Any effort of Will's would be its own serenade, unique in composition but similarly suited in purpose, and Hannibal can't help but wonder what it would do to Tobias to realize a copycat had hijacked his concerto and caught the attention of his single intended audience member. With three killers involved, the fallout could only be bloody.

And to see it, all Hannibal has to do is wind them up and watch them go.

Hannibal returns home two hours later than intended. Short winter days mean that it's already dark when he pulls up in front of his house, and it's the pitch black surrounding him that makes the bright glow of every single window of the house stand out that much more. If Hannibal had to wager a guess, he would put money on every light in the house being turned on.

The front door is locked – small mercies – and Hannibal lets himself inside. He's immediately assaulted by the scent of river water, silt and algae, potent enough that it makes him wrinkle his nose. A glance around the foyer reveals no muddy footprints or standing puddles, but the scent lingers all the same, heavy in the air.

With his mouth curled into a moue of distaste, Hannibal makes his way into the kitchen. The scent is stronger there, nearly overpowering, and the source of it is immediately apparent. A large styrofoam cooler is sitting on his counter, the lid firmly attached with pieces of duct tape. The outside of it is clean, spotless, even, but it's obviously the source of the watery, muddy scent.

He leaves the cooler alone. Will can explain himself when Hannibal finds him.

Upstairs, Hannibal finds the door to the guest room closed. He doesn't hesitate before reaching out to try the handle, but he's not surprised to find it locked. For all he delves flagrantly into the minds of others, Will values his privacy, his anonymity.

He pauses at the door to his own bedroom, though, his eyes falling to the slight gap between the door and the frame. He is certain he closed the door fully when he left in the morning, because that's what he always does; he hasn't made it where he is in life by being careless. But regardless of his actions in the morning, the door is ajar now.

"It's just me," Will calls from inside Hannibal's bedroom, and Hannibal can't help the wry twist of his mouth. Will isn't *just* anything – the possibility of him being on the other side of the door had been one of the things that had Hannibal hesitating in the hallway.

I showed you my teeth were just as sharp as yours so that you'd think twice before tearing into me. Will accomplished his mission. Hannibal doesn't, not for one moment, think Will is *tame* – not yet, in any case.

He pushes the door open.

Will is laid out on top of Hannibal's bed, his head resting on the pillow Hannibal uses, his bare toes curled into the comforter. He's changed clothing, although Hannibal can't say his current ensemble is much of an improvement – the ratty button-up has been replaced with a thin t-shirt, and the faded jeans have given way to a pair of dark gray cotton boxers.

He looks clean, at least. Freshly-showered, judging by the lingering scents in the room, and freshly-showered in *Hannibal's* shower at that. The products in Hannibal's bathroom are fragrance-free, but they still carry their natural scents, the soft, subtle notes of soap and oil and powder. Hannibal is intimately familiar with them, and now they're clinging to Will and the air surrounding him.

Before he gets a chance to comment, though, Will shifts, raising one hand. In it is a familiar rectangle of cardstock – one of Hannibal's business cards. "*Doctor Hannibal Lecter*," he says. "Christ. You sound like a Bond villain." Will pauses, flicking the card between his fingers and taking a moment to look Hannibal up and down. "But to be fair, you dress like one too."

It's clear from Will's expression that that's not necessarily a bad thing. Still, Hannibal sighs, trying to school his expression into something less reluctantly fond. "You should know, Will, that whenever feasible I try to eat the rude."

Will flashes him a smile. "Then it's a good thing my preemptive apology is in the kitchen."

Hannibal's treacherous heart doesn't do anything quite so telltale as skip a beat, but it lurches in his chest all the same. He's seen the Mimic's scenes; Will isn't an impulsive killer. He can't be, not with the complexity of his *modus operandi*. Planning a *harvestable* kill would have taken time, far more time than Will would have had, even considering Hannibal's excursion to the concert hall to examine Tobias' display.

Will raises an eyebrow at Hannibal's silence. "You didn't look?"

"I assumed you would show me when you were ready," Hannibal says.

"Oh. In that case." Will swings his legs over the side of the bed and stands up. "Come on."

Hannibal steps aside to let Will brush past him, and then follows him back downstairs. Will heads for the kitchen, immediately going over to the cooler and beginning to peel away the pieces of tape.

"Well," he says, impatiently. "Come here. Tell me if these fit your scrupulous standards."

Slowly, Hannibal approaches the cooler. He has a good idea of what's inside – aside from Will drowning a man, there's no other reason for the cooler to smell that strongly of river water – but he's still cautious.

Then Will raises the lid, and Hannibal peers inside.

In six or seven inches of water are two large trout, circling each other in quick, jerky movements. The cooler is too small for them to be entirely comfortable, but it's plenty large to have kept them alive and fresh. There are a number of dishes that won't suffer from the use of fish that has already gone into rigor, but there is one that brings itself to the forefront of Hannibal's mind that absolutely demands the freshest trout possible.

"Beautiful fish, Will," he murmurs. He shrugs out of his jacket, intending on making a trip upstairs to deposit it in his closet before beginning on preparations, but before he can move Will reaches out and plucks it out of his grasp.

Hannibal glances up at the younger man just in time to see a flash of a pleased flush spread over his cheeks. Will takes a seat on one of the barstools, spreading Hannibal's jacket out over his lap. "It was my turn to provide the meat," he says, settling as Hannibal moves into the kitchen to roll up his sleeves and wash his hands.

"Are we taking turns?" Hannibal asks, and Will makes a vague, dismissive gesture.

"Don't worry," he says. "I won't deny you the opportunity to provide for me." He pauses, watching as Hannibal dries his hands and takes out a cutting board, and then selects a knife from the block next to the sink. "You're not disappointed about being pescetarian for a night?"

Hannibal looks at Will as he reaches into the cooler, his fingers closing around one of the fish. "I would have been disappointed if you'd rushed into something underprepared," he answers. "I don't find variety upsetting, Will."

Will nods, and for a long moment, he's silent, watching as Hannibal prepares the fish. The process, Hannibal has been told, looks violent – one must stun the fish, first, and then gut them. *Fresh*, after all, means that nothing arrives tidily packaged and cleaned. Will doesn't appear to mind, however, and Hannibal didn't expect him to. If anything, Will's gaze is entranced as he watches Hannibal clean the fish before slipping them into a shallow pan filled with white wine vinegar.

"I'm a good fisherman, Hannibal," Will says quietly, breaking the silence. "But I'm an *excellent* hunter. Patience is more than just an attractive personality trait. It's a survival essential."

The fish tended to, Hannibal washes his hands and moves to the other needed preparations, setting water to boil for the broth and taking out another cutting board for the vegetables. As he lays out stalks of celery, he looks up at Will. "And the lights? Are those a survival essential as well?"

"Hmm?" Will looks around, as if just now noticing that every light in the house has been turned on. "Oh. I can't stand the dark."

"You didn't seem to mind walking in it this morning."

"Oh, no." Will shakes his head, shrugging one shoulder. "At the risk of sounding insufferable – 'I'm not afraid of the darkness outside. It's the darkness inside houses I don't like.'"

"Delaney," Hannibal acknowledges with a nod. "You don't sound insufferable, Will. There's a reason society has lauded poets and wordsmiths for centuries. The ability to articulate the shared human experience isn't a common one, nor is it one to be taken lightly."

Will ducks his head, but Hannibal can see the edges of his pleased smile. "We don't exactly partake in the shared human experience, people like you and me," he says. "But lights in houses make me feel... safe."

Hannibal hums. "Any port in a storm?"

"Come on." Will's fingers dart out, deftly snagging a piece of celery from the cutting board. He pops it into his mouth, grinning when all Hannibal does is purse his lips in annoyance. "You're not just *any* port."

His fingers make another swipe for the cutting board, and this time Hannibal smacks them lightly with the flat of the knife. Will jerks his hand back, but he doesn't look concerned. If anything, his expression becomes more amused, more *knowing*. "You gonna threaten to eat me again, Hannibal?" he asks, and this time his voice has sunk low, almost to a purr.

Hannibal ignores the heat that coils low in his stomach. "Threats are meant to frighten," he says. "You don't seem very frightened, Will."

"You're gonna have to come up with something a lot scarier if your intention is to *frighten* me."

Will shifts, a restless squirm, and Hannibal can't scent him over the smell of fish and river water, but he knows that look. His jacket is going to be saturated with the scent of Will's arousal. He wonders if his bed has suffered the same fate.

"Go get dressed," he says. "You will not dine at my table in your underwear."

Will raises an eyebrow as if to ask *really?*, but he slides off the barstool all the same. "All right, I'll go put more clothes on. An hour, you said?"

Hannibal hums his agreement.

"I suppose I can entertain myself for an hour," Will sighs. He lifts the jacket. "I'll put this in your room."

Hannibal waits until Will's footsteps have faded up the stairs to let out a long, shaky breath.

Now, more than ever, he wants to see Will's work firsthand.

An hour later, as Hannibal is setting the table, Will returns. As per Hannibal's request, he's dressed himself, hiding away swathes of bare skin underneath another pair of jeans and a gray sweater. He looks relaxed, comfortable, and when Hannibal walks past him, he expects to catch the scent of his release, sharp and bitter.

Instead, all he smells is turpentine, bright and piney, and the faintest hint of linseed oil. He files it away as another mystery, another layer of what makes Will so interesting, and makes a note to ask him about it at a later date.

Hannibal pours them wine and serves the fish, and then he and Will take their seats across the table from each other. "Truite au bleu," he explains. "A very-nearly forgotten French dish, because only fresh trout will take on the hallmark blue coloring during the cooking process."

Will's lip twitches, as if he's fighting a smile. "Elevating the ordinary, even here," he says. "This looks wonderful. Thank you."

Hannibal waits as Will takes the first bite, his eyes fluttering shut as he smiles, soft and sweet. "You're going to spoil me on good food," the younger man says. "I've probably cooked trout fifty times and it's never tasted quite like this. I'm going to have to find a way to return the favor."

Hannibal thinks of their agreement, and judging from the flash in Will's eyes, that's what he's thinking about too. It's the perfect opportunity, and Hannibal can't rightly let it go to waste, not with Will waiting so eagerly for his response.

"A few weeks ago I met a man at the opera," Hannibal says. "Tobias Budge. We... recognized each other for what we were. I had plans to deal with him quietly, but circumstances have changed. Today he killed a man, and used a patient of mine to relay his confession of the crime to me."

Will raises an eyebrow, and if he's thrown by the sudden change in topic, he doesn't show it. "He didn't trust that his kill would speak clearly enough to get his message across. How... *mundane*. Might as well have sent an email."

Hannibal smiles into his next bite of fish. Where others would see *gloating*, Will sees an *amateur*, sees *failure*. He judges the people around him by the same merciless metric that Hannibal does, and that metric is himself.

"Tobias considers himself an artist."

"I'm sure *Tobias* considers himself a lot of things he isn't," Will says sharply, and then his eyes flick to Hannibal. "Are you pushing me towards him for a reason?"

Hannibal sips from his glass of wine. "I wouldn't presume to dictate the subject of your artwork," he says. "I'm merely... offering up inspiration."

Will's eyes stay fixed on him, dark and wary. "An awfully convenient inspiration," he says, eventually. It's a concession, but there's not an inch of give in his expression. "I suppose I could look into holding up my end of our little agreement, if you think this *inspiration* is worth my time." He stabs a potato with his fork. "Tobias Budge, you said?"

Wind him up, Hannibal thinks, and watch him go.

Chapter End Notes

me, sprawled out on my couch, drunk on mango White Claws: gawd Budge you're such an *amateur*.

also hey, we have a final chapter count! which really just means I finally got around to plotting the rest of this monster (i.e. I finished cannibalizing (heh) lines from the show and various pieces of literature and putting them into some semblance of order).

we're gonna get a little of Will's POV next chapter ;) Hannibal has no idea what he's unleashed.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Will's breath catches in his throat, and his design sharpens into sudden, stunning clarity in his mind.

Chapter Notes

CW: graphic corpse desecration. Will creates his own Tobias Budge-esque tableau in this chapter, and part of the making of it is described. the full piece will be described in the next chapter when Hannibal gets called to the scene to examine it. I feel like this sort of occurrence is a given in this fandom, but I also don't want to catch anyone off-guard, especially because I'm updating the tags as I go, so this is your reminder that Will is a serial killer and shit gets dark.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Will slips out of his room early Wednesday morning, while dawn is painting the sky pink and Hannibal is still asleep in his bed.

Normally, he would seek out his killer before making any plans, give himself the chance to dip into their headspace before lining up his own potential victims and refining his methodology. And, normally, that would take time, days or even weeks, because if a killer had earned the privilege of being mimicked, they weren't liable to be careless enough to be found easily.

This time, thanks to Hannibal, Will has a name, and thanks to the internet, he has Budge's place of work. His hunt has been cut in half.

He ducks into Hannibal's study before he leaves, going over to the harpsichord and letting one hand dip into the case. He runs gentle fingers over the strings, but he doesn't feel any anomalies, doesn't see any rusting near the pins. Given the general state of Hannibal's house, he supposes any amount of disrepair was a little too much to hope for.

It's a shame, but he'll just have to come up with another plausible excuse for dropping by to see Budge.

He lingers in the house just long enough to grab his leftovers from the previous day's breakfast and tuck the container into his backpack. Then Will calls a cab, and on the way into the city he reads Tattle-Crime's coverage of the concert hall killing. He won't know until he

meets Budge that it was his, not for certain, but it fits – he owns the string shop, so he would have the knowledge necessary to transform vocal cords into a playable medium. And it's the only killing in the given timeframe that even begins to whet Will's appetite.

His design starts to take shape in the back of his mind, vague and blurry around the edges. There are only so many stringed instruments, after all, and only so many ways one can fuse them with the human body. And only a handful of body parts can be transformed and played like the concert hall victim's vocal cords were.

He has the cab drop him off, not in front of Budge's string shop, but at a pawn shop. Inside, he purchases a violin that's seen better days; the body is intact if a little worn in a handful of places, and three strings are missing. In other words, it's perfect for Will's purposes. The pawn shop owner sells it to him for three hundred bucks, and Will pretends it's not the unbelievable rip-off it is.

He does, however, make note of the shop's name. Overcharging, he thinks, falls under the broad category of *rude*.

Then, with his plausible excuse tucked away in its case under his arm, Will heads for Budge's shop.

The bell rings as he walks inside, though Will doesn't immediately see anyone. The shop is small, quaint – from the outside it looks fairly unassuming. From the inside, though... from the inside, it's a different story. It takes Will a moment to realize why the hairs on the back of his neck are standing up, why, despite his every effort, he feels an undercurrent of excitement.

His mind has barely closed around the thought when a man appears around the corner, and Will, more out of habit than any conscious effort, *slips*.

He feels himself brighten, feels a smile play out across his face, easy and genuine. Most of the minds Will dips into are dark, fractured places, and rightfully so – well-adjusted people don't typically do the sorts of things that garner Will's attention. But there comes a problem with only having psychopaths and sociopaths taking up space in your head: if anyone goes looking, that's all they're going to find.

Most people (if there is such a thing as "most people" when it comes to their ilk) build walls, false identities that are a patchwork of traits thrown together to resemble a personality. It works better for some than it does for others, but Will sees no reason to create a false version of himself when he can just... borrow one.

So when he looks at Tobias Budge, he sees the emptiness behind the man's eyes, the cold, dull spark of cruelty that takes the place of any softer emotion. But when Budge looks at him, all he sees is a customer. Ordinary, in every way.

"What brings you in today?" Budge asks.

Will hefts the violin case. "I, ah, made a little bit of an impulse purchase, but it came incomplete. Do you sell just strings?"

Budge smiles. It doesn't reach his eyes. "Of course. Steel and polymer, or catgut, if you prefer."

"*Catgut?*" Will repeats, and the mild horror that creeps into his voice is almost as amusing to him as it is obviously annoying to Budge. He sees the instant that the man dismisses him, labels him as *unimportant* and stops paying attention. Even as he launches into an explanation about how catgut isn't really cat's guts, Budge's attention wanders, his eyes remaining on Will but his mind clearly going elsewhere.

This time, when Will slips, it's deliberate.

In the passenger seat of the Bentley, drawing on the guise of Hannibal Lecter had felt like benediction. When Will closes his eyes he can take himself back to that moment, to that first taste of a mind so beautifully structured, so dangerously complex – so immediately familiar. It's a memory he knows he'll want to revisit often. It's a mind he wants to keep as close to his own as possible.

Slipping into Tobias Budge feels like swallowing an oil slick. Will doesn't falter, doesn't let the easy smile fall from his face – he's more experienced than that. But it's a close thing. Where Hannibal had curled comfortably around his mind, radiant even in his darkness, Budge claws at the edges of Will's consciousness, harsh and brittle all at the same time.

Budge's psychopathy just makes it all the more evident that Hannibal is beyond classification, beyond ideas like *psychopathy* and *sadism* and the other keywords the FBI's profilers like to throw around. He scrabbles desperately to achieve what comes to Hannibal as naturally as breathing, and still, he fails.

All the same, the delve gives Will what he needs, the glimpse into what passes as Budge's soul. Even as it stains him, seeps in at his edges like spilled ink, he knows it will lend authenticity to the scene he crafts. The exchange is worth it. It *will* be worth it.

Will tries to tuck Budge away into a corner of his mind, tidy and compact, but his influence clings. It's not overwhelming – at least, not yet – but it's not a pleasant feeling either, being forced to share a headspace. Will resists the urge to grit his teeth. "Steel," he tells Budge, when he realizes the man is waiting for him to make a decision. "A full set? Just in case."

Budge nods, disappointed but not surprised, and something clicks into place in Will's mind.

The man had wanted Hannibal to know about his kill, obviously. That's why he'd sent his messenger. Will had assumed the concerto kill was a first, a new foray, but that's not the case at all. Budge is used to killing. Budge, he thinks, has likely been killing people for as long as he's been running the string shop, if not longer, supplying the catgut he claims is imported.

The cello man was a proposal. The realization slithers down Will's spine and pools in his abdomen, slick and cold. Budge's scene was him trying to prove a point: he and Hannibal are the same, both killers hiding in plain sight who take pieces from their victims and distribute them back out into the world.

Budge believes it, too, believes that he's Hannibal's equal, his peer. Believes that his recklessness would be welcomed and that his so-called artistry would be appreciated. He's waiting for Hannibal's answer, thinking it's just a matter of time before the man accepts him into the fold, blithely unaware that he's selling strings *to* Hannibal's response.

Will pays for the strings with a forced smile, and pretends he's not picturing Budge's body on a stage, splayed out over a chair, with its throat slit and its vocal cords bared to the world. It would be fitting, turning the man into the display he so arrogantly assumed would net him Hannibal, but Will can't. If he's going to mimic Budge, he can't kill him. Not yet, anyway.

After he brings his own version of the concert hall killing to life, though? He makes no promises.

He leaves the shop already thinking about his scene. He could choose direct duplication, of course. Budge's crime scene had been far from perfect, and if the FBI found another musician with his throat slit and his vocal cords bowed until they sang they would assume the killer was working towards perfection, refining his technique.

He could go bigger, escalate in size rather than in complexity. It's more work, of course. More bodies means more time, and more chances to make mistakes. But it's another reasonable assumption to make of a killer of his profile, building up in number rather than variety until he's delivering an entire string section to the FBI.

And, maybe, if Will hadn't encountered Hannibal on his way into Baltimore, that would have been enough. Maybe if he wasn't playing for his own audience, he'd be content with a simpler sort of escalation, but Hannibal is not a man of simple tastes, and Will wants to impress.

He wants to *actually* impress. Budge is serenading the Chesapeake Ripper, but Will is serenading *Hannibal Lecter*, and he's damn well going to do it right.

Any town with a liberal arts school is never lacking for auditions for parts in small, independent productions, and Baltimore has more than its fair share. Will spends an hour browsing online postings, noting times and locations of a handful of them that look promising.

Cecelia Danlos attends each of the five auditions Will trawls over the next two days. She's a musical theater student, a fair and petite young woman with long dark hair that she wears tied back at the nape of her neck. Something about the way she moves draws Will's attention, more than the other repeat tryouts he's seen – she's restrained yet fluid, carrying herself one moment with the grace of a dancer and the next with exaggerated care.

Cecelia walks out of the fifth audition with a twist of pain in her features and her phone already in her hand. Will stays close to her as she brings it up to her ear and listens in on the conversation.

"Yeah," she says into the phone as she heads towards her car. "I think it went well? At least until the end, anyway. I don't even know what I did, just turned too quickly I guess, but I

definitely slipped a rib.”

Will’s breath catches in his throat, and his design sharpens into sudden, stunning clarity in his mind.

She’ll play herself, he thinks, unable to keep the petty pleasure from blooming in his chest. His kill may be for Hannibal, but there’s no reason he can’t send Budge a message as well. His, at least, won’t need a secondary delivery system. He’s better than that.

He wishes he could see the moment of realization, the sweet curl of fury that will hook itself into Budge’s ego and *tug*. That would be risky, though, and as satisfying as it would be, Will doesn’t do risky – at least, not more than he can help it.

He lets Cecelia go, at least for the moment. He has other preparations to make.

Will steals the chemicals he needs from Budge’s shop, because while he avoids risk whenever possible, it seems both he and Budge appreciate the value of a good *fuck you*. It’s difficult enough to rein in the minds he lets into his head when their impulses disagree with his own; when they line up so perfectly, it’s nearly impossible.

He breaks into the Miriam A. Friedberg concert hall late Friday night. The whole building is closed for renovations, and while workers are on site every day, they’re mainly focused on the exterior. It’s risky to work there, but Will doesn’t have much of a choice. He can steal materials from Budge, after all, but not space and time.

He peruses the hall’s equipment storage until he finds what he’s looking for. The harp is beautiful, made of mahogany wood and intricately carved – and small. It only stands about three feet high, which, for Will’s purposes, is perfect.

He takes the harp apart with care. Each string gets unwound from its tuning pin and laid aside, hanging from its anchor point in the soundboard. They’re steel, each of them, and that settles the part of his mind that Budge has taken up residence in. He finds it fitting. Will may not be re-stringing the harp with gut, but it will be better than steel.

The harp is, in essence, three pieces of wood fastened together. The strings run from the soundboard to the neck, and the pillar connects the two, forming a more-or-less equilateral triangle. Will is only interested in two of the pieces, though. Carefully, he pries the neck and pillar away from the soundboard, making sure the two pieces stay attached to each other as he takes them out onto the stage, where they join the rest of his supplies.

And then, as soon as everything else is ready, he steals Cecelia away from her home.

He dispatches of her perfunctorily, a single blow to the back of the head that she doesn’t see coming, and then he loads her into her own car and takes her back to the concert hall.

Under the cover of night, he opens one side of the chest and exposes the ribs. Careful not to damage the costal cartilage, he severs the muscle and connective tissue that lies between each of the ribs with his knife, gently peeling it away from the bone. After that, he dislocates the

ribs one by one, popping them out from where they're locked against her spine and sternum both.

The cartilage, he makes sure, stays firmly attached to the sternum.

The first tub he stole from Budge contains potassium hydroxide. He moves the body so that it's bent sideways over the tub, dangling bits of cartilage suspended in the liquid inside, and then, satisfied that things are progressing as they should be, he settles himself in to wait.

Later, he slips a little, and finds that cartilage doesn't stretch quite as easily as intestines do. It's slippery under his fingers, but the hydroxide has done its job and denatured the collagen inside the cartilage enough that, with a little effort, it starts to spread under pressure, lengthening slowly between his hands.

The harp he deconstructed had twenty-two strings. The human rib cage has ten segments of costal cartilage. It bothers Will more than it should that it's not a perfect match, that there aren't twenty-two segments to connect to the tuning pins. He doesn't want to leave them empty. It feels... incomplete. His audience deserves more than that.

His eyes fall to the remaining steel strings, and he pauses, considering.

When he makes his decision, Budge's fury is *incandescent*.

Budge clings to him, even as Will leaves his completed tableau behind.

He's practiced, at this point, at shrugging off even the most tenacious of minds, the ones that wind around him like a vice and refuse to let go. But part of that process is the acknowledgement that the competing voices in his head want different things, that there is no way for the killer Will has welcomed in to stay and be fulfilled.

The trouble, Will finds, is that he and Budge want the same thing.

Hannibal.

Will can't keep his distance. His kill is going to provoke a response out of Budge, and if that response centers on Hannibal, Will needs to be there. He has no doubt that Hannibal is more than capable of defending himself, of subduing Budge, but something in him rebels at the thought of it.

It's petty and possessive, but Will isn't going to let Budge anywhere near Hannibal. Not if he can help it.

Budge lingers, even when Will gets back to the house. It's the middle of the night, and he's quiet as he slips inside, picking the lock on the front door because Hannibal never gave him a key. It doesn't feel like an intrusion, though. It feels like letting himself in somewhere only he belongs.

The added presence in his head dampens that pleasure only a little.

He intends to go upstairs and put himself to bed, in the hopes that, when he wakes, Budge will have given up and disappeared. When he reaches the landing, though, he finds himself hesitating, drawn more towards Hannibal's door than his own.

His hand is on the doorknob before he's even really aware he's made a decision.

The room on the other side of the door is dark, but Will can see the vague form of Hannibal under the blankets, flat on his back, proper and restrained even in sleep. Will itches to enter the room, to wake the man and let him know his commission has been prepared and should be ready for collection in the morning.

Budge just wants to be seen, to be acknowledged, to...

Will grits his teeth and forces himself to stay put.

The doorway is his line in the sand. As long as he can feel Budge seeping from his pores, he won't cross the line. That will have to be enough.

The fourth night of Will's absence, Hannibal wakes in the small hours of the morning to a figure standing in his doorway.

The man is standing stiffly, his shoulders drawn back and his chin lifted slightly. His hands are in his pockets, and his feet are planted firmly on the ground. In the light of the hallway, Hannibal can see a familiar head of curls, but for all that it's Will's body taking up space in the doorway, it's all too obvious that it isn't *Will*. Not entirely, at least.

Still, when Hannibal speaks, it's not Tobias' name that spills from his lips. "Will. I was starting to get worried."

Will jerks as if startled, and he takes half a step forward before he catches himself. He wrangles himself back into the doorway with a viciousness Hannibal has only seen before in caged, cornered animals.

"I am not the person you should be worried about right now," he grits out.

It almost sounds like a threat.

Will seems to realize this a moment after Hannibal does. He lets out a shaky breath, ducking his head as he visibly tries to assert some control over himself.

"I'm... not entirely me," he says. "Your *inspiration* is proving harder to shake than I thought he would be."

Hannibal was awake the moment he saw Will, but now he feels the first stirrings of adrenaline. "What is it that I would be worried about?"

The sound Will makes is sharp, a laugh that's cut off too soon. "He wants to be your *friend*."

Slowly, Hannibal sits up. Will is on-edge, wired; Hannibal has no desire to cause him to snap over something like a sudden movement. “Wanting friendship isn’t so unusual,” he says. “Don’t you want to be my friend, Will?”

Will scoffs, another sharp, dismissive sound. “Don’t compare us,” he bites out. “If friendship was all I wanted out of you, I would’ve asked for it. Sounds a lot fuckin’ simpler than *patron*, doesn’t it?”

Perhaps pushing the subject now isn’t the safest course of action, but Will is raw, laid bare in a way Hannibal hasn’t seen before. Even the way he speaks has changed – it’s the faintest of accents, the barest hints of a drawl, but Hannibal tunes into it all the same, and he pushes. “What is it you want from me, then?”

Will bares his teeth in a silent snarl. “I thought you didn’t ask questions you already knew the answer to.”

“Humor me.”

Will’s eyes glitter in the low light, and for a moment, Hannibal sees nothing behind them. Then the man shifts, *slips*, and reaches up to drag a hand over his mouth.

“Budge saw something in you,” he says, so quietly Hannibal can barely hear him. “A darkness, a coldness, something that he felt drawn to because a similar feeling echoed inside the hollowness of his own being. It was so different from the front that you present to the world that he assumed it was the truth, and the entirety of it. And he thought that being your *friend* would allow him close enough that you could share in that similarity.” Will pauses and licks his lips, his eyes never leaving Hannibal’s face. “He wants the Ripper.”

Something tightens in Hannibal’s throat, and he swallows carefully against it. Will’s eyes flick to his neck, and then back up to his face, the blue of them almost otherworldly in the low light.

“What do *you* want from me, Will?”

Will’s eyes flash. “I want *everything*.”

Hannibal has heard that phrase before. He’s never been shy about the fact that there are aspects of himself he keeps tucked away, hidden. People who consider themselves his friends have taken his continued reticence as a sign of mistrust; people who consider themselves his lovers have taken it as a sign of noncommitment. Both have tried to assure him that, no matter what it is that he’s hiding, it won’t affect how they see him, making promises they would regret if he ever tried to hold them to them.

Will’s words aren’t meaningless platitudes. He pulled Hannibal around himself and called the farthest reaches of his mind *beautiful*, licked Hannibal’s blood off his fingers and understood exactly what it meant.

Oh, Hannibal thinks, and feels his chest nearly seize with the force of the realization.

He's never submitted to anything, not willingly, not since he felt the bars of a cage under his hands and the cold curl of hunger heavy in his belly. But this, he thinks, might be the exception. He may, willingly, submit to the mortifying ordeal of being known, if Will is the one knowing.

"Will," Hannibal says quietly. "Come here."

Will jerks forward at the words, and then pulls himself back just as sharply. "No," he says, his voice a little strangled, but firm. "No. Budge is still... I don't trust myself to put my hands on you right now."

"*Will...*"

"And I don't trust you to know where to draw the line."

Hannibal's teeth click as his mouth nearly slams shut, and Will, shoulders stiff and knees locked, flashes him a wry smile.

"You're used to being the most dangerous person in the room," he says, and his voice has gone gentle again, vowels drawn out and slow. "And darlin', that's just not the case anymore."

The fire that licks up Hannibal's spine is expected, but no less intense for all he was braced for it. Will's smile goes sharp, toothy, and he huffs a breath of laughter as his tongue darts out, wetting his bottom lip.

"I'm gonna go for a walk," he says. "Clear my head. My guess is the FBI's going to have your morning booked up solid, so I'd try to go back to sleep if I was you."

He closes the door before Hannibal can argue.

A glance at the alarm clock on the nightstand tells him that trying to go back to sleep would be almost pointless. It's nearly four – in an hour, he'd be awake anyway.

He might as well be ready when Jack calls and asks for his help.

An hour and a half later, Hannibal makes his way downstairs, dressed and ready to prepare something for breakfast. There's no sign of Will, but as soon as he enters the kitchen he hears the sound of running water, muffled, like it's coming from the other side of the wall.

The other side of the wall is the side of his house.

Sighing, he glances at the knife block. It's tempting, to arm himself, but it's also risky to walk around outside armed with a kitchen knife. Neighbors talk, and Hannibal would prefer not to have to put any of them on his menu.

Ultimately, he walks outside, sans knife. The scent hits him before the sight does, yeast and dirt and sulfur all wrapped up together in a particularly humid combination. Then he sees Will, kneeling on the ground, with Hannibal's garden hose in one hand and the other sunk

firmly into the fur that is the source of the scent. Dog and man look up at Hannibal at the same time, one with the good-natured smile characteristic of its species, the other with an expression slightly more sheepish.

“He was out there all by himself,” Will offers, the tone of his voice gently cajoling and only slightly defensive. “I couldn’t just leave him.”

He’s entirely Will, now. There’s no trace of Tobias in the set of his shoulders, in the rasp of his words, and it’s that, more than anything else, that makes Hannibal waver. He sighs, looking from man to dog and back again.

“You’ve named him already, haven’t you?”

Will grins, color staining his cheeks. “Hannibal, this is Winston.” He turns to the dog. “Winston, this is Hannibal. Be nice, and he might even cook for you.”

“That’s hardly a requirement,” Hannibal says dryly, and when Will looks up at him with confusion drawing his brows together, Hannibal huffs. “I refuse to allow *kibble* into the house.”

Will chuckles under his breath. “All right, no kibble. Any other rules I should know about?”

“No dogs in the kitchen, Will. I beg of you.”

Silence falls between them as Will waits for more and Hannibal, fully aware, doesn’t provide any more. Slowly, Will shifts, his eyes going dark and probing. *Catlike*, Hannibal thinks, not for their color or any other physical attributes, but for how they suddenly make him feel as if he’s being toyed with.

“You don’t usually let people push your boundaries, do you?” Will cocks his head, dragging his gaze over Hannibal’s body. Despite the question, he doesn’t give Hannibal time to answer. “When they do, you eat them. But you let me.”

Hannibal’s laugh is short, harsh. “My dear boy, you aren’t *pushing* anything. Quite frankly, you’re *demolishing*.”

Will raises an eyebrow, but he looks pleased. “You’re still letting me.”

“I find myself unwilling to resist.”

The eyebrow arches further. “Unwilling, or unable?”

Yes, Hannibal thinks. He clears his throat. “Make sure he’s dry before you bring him inside. Winston, you said?”

Will nods, his expression still critical, but he allows the change in topic to slide.

Hannibal sighs. “I’ll order a collar. If he’s going to live here, we can’t have him looking like a stray.”

“Hannibal,” Will says, a note of fond exasperation in his voice, “he *is* a stray.”

“He stopped being a stray the moment you decided to bring him home,” Hannibal counters, and he doesn’t miss the way Will’s eyes snap to his, wide and searching.

You won’t like me when I’m psychoanalyzed, he’d said, but Hannibal can’t help but see some things. He wonders when Will last called a place *home*, when he stayed somewhere long enough and stayed *himself* long enough to settle. He wonders if Will even realizes that’s what he’s doing now: settling. Making himself comfortable.

“Yeah,” Will says slowly, and neither of them mention the fact that his voice has acquired more gravel than is entirely explicable. “Yeah, I suppose he did.”

Chapter End Notes

and now we’re really getting into it. I promise these two will stop getting in their own way soon – the tension needs to wind just a *little* higher before it snaps. (with porn. it will snap with porn. I promise. the reward for the mortifying ordeal of being known is LOVE, goddamnit. the next chapter is gonna be one hell of a ride for everyone involved ;))

also Will would totally have at least a *hint* of a Southern accent, especially when he gets worked up. fight me about it.

(P.S. I am fucking *floored* by the response to this fic. thank you for all the love, my brain truly appreciates the bonus serotonin <3)

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

It doesn't matter how well you play, Will's scene says. Your services aren't needed.

Chapter Notes

CW: there are kinks brought into play in this chapter that are not discussed beforehand. it is mutually enjoyable and neither of the characters involved take issue with it, but I'm fully aware that's not how things should work in real life, and I'm also aware it's a trigger topic, so I'm issuing an extra warning outside the tags.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jack summons Hannibal to the scene not long after Will returns home with Winston.

On the phone, he's agitated, his voice clipped and harsh, which is a rarity. Jack only gets truly flustered on a handful of occasions, like when the bodies start piling up or the evidence goes cold – or when a certain redhead sticks her nose where it doesn't belong and walks away with far more information than she should have.

Hannibal resists the urge to check Tattle-Crime. He wants to see Will's artistry in person for the first time, not in a furtive, sneaky snapshot.

By the time he makes it into the city, anticipation is a sweet weight in the pit of his stomach, and his human veil, the one Will so carelessly swept aside, is drawn back into place. He tries to ignore the way it feels heavier, more grating than it ever does. The mask never quite feels comfortable, but the last time Hannibal tucked his true nature away for the sake of Jack and his team, he didn't have the memory of Will standing in the doorway to his bedroom, eyes flashing, saying *I want everything*.

Hannibal doesn't push the thought from his mind so much as he tucks it away into its own room. The room he's built for Will in his mind palace is already growing as he attempts to contain everything he's coming to learn about the man, from the way the South bleeds into his voice when he's *himself* to the way he so easily projects innocence when it's needed. The only solid piece of knowledge Hannibal has is Will's identity as the Mimic – the rest is bits and pieces, observations paired with what Will has deigned to reveal about himself.

A strong dislike for psychiatry. Sadistic tendencies, strong but not overpowering. A penchant for manipulation. Incredible self-control. A vast protective streak. Turpentine and linseed oil.

A fondness for strays. A fondness for mimicry. A good fisherman, but an excellent hunter.

It's a conglomeration of personal, intimate details of Will's psyche and odd pieces of information Hannibal hasn't quite placed yet, and he realizes, with a start, that he likely knows Will better than anyone else ever has. Anyone who is still alive, at any rate. And yet, Will's last name isn't among the data points Hannibal has so carefully been storing away.

As soon as the thought occurs to him, another follows immediately in its wake. Will has been incredibly transparent with him, allowing Hannibal to see the *truth* of him, without hesitation. He's shown Hannibal the dark, feral thing inside him, *killed* for Hannibal – and at the same time, given the doctor nothing that would allow him to discover who, exactly, Will is.

Will knows the Chesapeake Ripper is Doctor Hannibal Lecter, Baltimore psychiatrist, FBI consultant. Hannibal knows the Mimic is the man currently occupying his guest bedroom. He's fairly certain Will is his real name, but beyond that, he knows very little of Will's true identity.

He appears to be in his early to mid-thirties, though Hannibal is aware that the way Will likes to present himself, small, with a head full of untidy curls, likely makes him look younger than he is. He most probably hails from somewhere in the South; Hannibal would guess Louisiana, judging by the French influence that slips into Will's accent when he allows it to. There are signs of childhood instability, perhaps the result of being orphaned and shuffled around the foster care system, but it's just as likely Will had parents who worked transient jobs and moved frequently. At some point, Will went to high school and read *The Iliad*.

That is the sum total of what Hannibal knows of Will's history, of his identity outside the Mimic.

Anyone looking in would say this power imbalance swings heavily in your favor. Hannibal remembers the flash of Will's eyes in his study, the feeling of being lured, of being *caught*, and he thinks that it's true. Anyone looking in would see the scales tipped firmly in his favor.

The true balance, however, feels much more precarious.

Jack is waiting outside the concert hall when Hannibal arrives. His face is drawn, pinched, and Hannibal revisits his earlier assessment, readjusts. Jack is *annoyed*, and that can only mean one thing.

Hannibal's eyes flick to the crowd gathered at the edge of the police perimeter. "News spreads quickly," he comments, careful to keep his voice neutral, and Jack sighs.

"Freddie Lounds sweet-talked her way inside before we got here," he says. "Local PD kept her away from the actual scene, but she still got photos. They went live about ten minutes before I called you."

Well, Hannibal thinks, at least there's no question whether Tobias will see his competition's work.

He follows Jack inside, walking past construction workers who have been taken aside for questioning. Jack sees Hannibal's eyes linger on them, and as they enter the auditorium, he explains. "They're the ones who found the body. The building is in the middle of being renovated. When they arrived for work this morning, they found the front doors unlocked and wide open. They went to investigate, and that's when they found the victim."

As they approach the stage, Hannibal's eyes drift upwards. His view is blocked by various techs and CSIs – he recognizes Beverly Katz, but not the others. It's not until he ascends the stairs onto the stage that, finally, he sees Will's tableau in its entirety.

At first glance, the woman appears to be at rest, cradling a harp in her lap, as if she simply dozed off in the middle of a song. Her head is hung low, her right cheek laid against the neck of the harp, and her dark hair hangs down in waves, shielding the side of her torso that retains its skin and fatty tissue.

The right side of her is exposed, in every sense of the word. Everything from her collarbone down to her last floating rib has been removed, the side of her hollowed out in its entirety. The lung is gone, and half the diaphragm as well – the harp's pillar has been sunk into the woman's abdominal cavity and braced against her pelvis, so Hannibal suspects the organs there have been removed as well. As Hannibal draws closer, he realizes that the woman's right arm is missing entirely, and that the neck of the harp has taken its place, lashed to the clavicle and scapula with what appears to be steel strings. But all of that is merely preparation, setting the stage for the true purpose of the tableau.

The woman's costal cartilage has been stretched, shaped into long, thin reeds and fastened to alternating tuning pins on the neck of the harp. The remaining pins have been restrung with steel, with the opposite ends anchored at the woman's sternum.

As the final touch, the woman's left hand has been posed over the strings, rigor mortis keeping her fingers pressed against steel and cartilage alike.

"Cecelia Danlos," Jack says, jerking Hannibal out of his reverie. "Theater arts student at the University of Maryland here in Baltimore."

"She's playing herself," Hannibal says, his voice quiet, and Jack turns to look at him.

"Is that important?"

Yes, Hannibal wants to say. Yes, isn't it obvious?

But it wouldn't be, not to Jack, who thinks this is this same killer. Hannibal knows differently, knows this is Will, and that makes all the difference in his perception of the scene before him.

Tobias Budge had left the aftermath of a concerto, the echo of a serenade. That was why he'd felt the need to send Franklyn along with his confession – for all intents and purposes, he'd played to an empty room and left his instrument out for Hannibal to find. With the judicious application of deductive reasoning, it wasn't difficult to arrive at his intention, but it required effort all the same.

That isn't the case with Will's scene. Cecelia Danlos is not an abandoned instrument. She is a paused recording, a melody frozen in time, not an echo but a snapshot. Will has made all of them her audience, Hannibal included, achieving what Tobias couldn't quite manage.

But that isn't all. Will's serenade is twofold. The first part is for Hannibal, the proof that he is what he says he is, and, beyond that, the proof that he's more than Tobias ever could be. But there's another part as well, underlying it, a secondary message. Tobias might not have been able to construct a scene of this caliber, but Hannibal has no doubt that he'll be able to read it, not when the words are spelled out so clearly.

It doesn't matter how well you play, Will's scene says. Your services aren't needed.

It's little more than a taunt, of course, a dig at Tobias' ego. He sees himself as special, sees his work as something only a man of his particular brand of intelligence would be able to pull off. Will has not only done the same, but done it in a fashion that would all but render Tobias' presence unnecessary. He wouldn't be needed to play this harp, because she's playing herself.

He wouldn't be needed to play this harp, because, restrung like she is, anyone could play her.

"Why a harp?"

Hannibal thinks, briefly, of serving Jack's tongue for Will. He loathes the interruption, the forced break in his examination of Will's scene, even though he's aware that it's necessary. He is here in a consultant's capacity – in order to remain, he must consult.

"Harps are among the oldest known instruments," Hannibal says. "Early attempts were constructed from hunting bows. The classical shape came later, along with the traditional association with angels and celestial melodies."

Jack sighs. "This guy's getting into religious symbolism now?"

Hannibal shakes his head. "No, I don't think so. Not blatantly, at least. It's more..." He pauses. "Continuity. Permanence. Harps strung with gut still make music after 2000 years. Perhaps our killer wants to make a lasting impression." Hannibal shrugs. "Perhaps it's simply because it's fitting. The part of the harp that's lashed to her socket *is* called the shoulder."

Beverly looks up from her note-taking. "We'll know for sure once we get everything back to the lab, but it looks like the cartilage was treated with the same chemicals as the last victim. The rest of her is backstage, if you're interested."

Hannibal looks at her. "The rest of her?"

She nods, and then gestures with her chin backstage. "Everything he took from her is packed up into the harp case. Price and Zeller are back there now."

Jack turns to Hannibal. "I'm confident this is the same killer who produced the cello victim. Do you see anything to discredit that theory, Doctor Lecter?"

"I believe that's a reasonable assumption to make," Hannibal responds, his gaze returning to the tableau. "Was he successful?"

“I’m sorry?”

“The killer played the trombonist’s vocal cords like a violin. That was the purpose of the exercise. One can only assume that his intention with Miss Danlos here was to play her as well. If he was successful, he may be content to lie low for the time being. But if he wasn’t...”

“We might be looking at another victim soon.” Jack sighs, shaking his head. “All right, someone check to see if she’s... playable.”

Beverly looks at Jack, and then at Hannibal, and then back again. “I drew the short straw on checking the trombonist for *playability*,” she says, and then, walking towards Hannibal, thrusts a pair of latex gloves in his direction. “Have at it.”

Hannibal contains the shiver of pleasure he feels through sheer force of will, and dons the gloves before approaching the body. He reaches out, careful not to dislodge the hand that’s poised over the strings, and plucks one of the shorter ones closest to her neck.

The tone it produces is a low, vibrating *thrum*, not quite as clear as that of a traditional string, but a sound all the same. Hannibal resists the urge to smile, resists the urge to reach out and pluck another of the cartilaginous strings – one he’ll be able to get away with, but two will be hard to excuse.

“I think we may call that a success,” he says, turning back to Jack. “Now, unless you have any further need of me...”

Jack is already turning away. “No, that should be all. Thanks.”

Rude, Hannibal thinks idly, but he can’t even bring himself to summon any true irritation. Will’s scene is lovely, a true masterpiece, and Hannibal suddenly wants nothing more than to tell him as much, to see if Will’s cheeks will heat with pleasure or if he’ll accept the praise with the grace of an artist who is very aware of his worth.

Hannibal bids farewell to Beverly, who looks up from what she’s doing long enough to make eye contact and say goodbye with a good deal more politeness than Jack managed. Then, with no small measure of reluctance, Hannibal disposes of his gloves and shows himself out of the auditorium.

As he returns to his car, he retrieves his phone from his pocket. It’s become a habit to check it, even on the days he’s supposed to be off work – being “available” to his patients is another stitch in his person-suit, another step away from the profile of the Ripper. The facade of empathy, as it were.

His phone notifies him that he has seven missed calls, all from one Franklyn Froideveaux. The sigh he lets out is entirely involuntary, and entirely frustrated, but he still brings the phone up to his ear to listen to the most recent voicemail.

When he hears Franklyn say, “*I think I have to report it,*” he immediately presses the redial button.

“Franklyn,” he says when the call connects, half a breath later. “I’m so glad I caught you. Are you able to meet me at my office?”

“But I could be wrong.”

Hannibal grits his teeth as Franklyn, with very little outside input, talks himself out of going to the police with his knowledge of Tobias. He’s an indecisive man to begin with – when put under stress, his ability to make a difficult decision all but evaporates. It’s the outcome Hannibal was counting on, but getting there is still a painful process.

Franklyn sighs, putting his face into his hands. “People say stuff all the time,” he reasons, and Hannibal looks down at the notepad on his lap. “It doesn’t mean he meant anything by it. I mean, what are the odds that Tobias is the one out there doing these awful, horrible things?”

What are the chances of two serial killers being in one car? Hannibal thinks.

“The odds are better than you think.”

Franklyn startles at the sound of Tobias’ voice, immediately jumping to his feet. Hannibal moves more slowly, first turning his head to take in the man in the doorway, and then rising, setting aside his notepad and straightening his jacket as he gets to his feet.

Tobias looks... not quite frantic, but there’s a gleam in his eyes that has Hannibal on edge. “I told you exactly what I wanted to do,” he says, speaking to Franklyn but keeping his gaze firmly fixed on Hannibal. “It’s not my fault you didn’t believe me.”

“Oh my god,” Franklyn breathes. “Okay. Okay, you’re right. You did tell me. You wanted my help, and I let you down. But I know what that means, okay? I know it means you didn’t really want to do the things you did. You wanted me to stop you. Right?” He looks back at Hannibal for confirmation, and Hannibal, despite himself, is almost impressed. If Tobias wasn’t what he was, if *Hannibal* wasn’t what he was, Franklyn’s little appeal might have had a chance at working.

“Franklyn,” Hannibal interrupts. “I want you to go now.”

“Stay right where you are, Franklyn.”

Hannibal sighs. The wild gleam in Tobias’ eyes is growing brighter with each passing breath, and at any moment it’s going to spill over into action. With Franklyn between them, he’ll likely be the first target of Tobias’ breakthrough anger, but killing Franklyn won’t sate any of the jealous anger Tobias is feeling. It’ll only drive it higher.

Hannibal really can’t afford to have that anger driven higher.

“We can’t change the decisions we’ve made in the past,” Franklyn says, his voice gentle as he takes a slow, hesitant step towards Tobias. “But we can decide what the future is going to look like. Now, I know how alone you must feel right now...”

“I’m not *alone*,” Tobias snaps, his eyes flicking to Hannibal, and, well. That’s enough of that.

Hannibal steps up behind Franklyn, and, in one smooth motion, reaches up and snaps the man's neck. Franklyn slumps to the ground, and Tobias blinks at the body, and then back up at Hannibal, confusion replacing the hot gleam of anger for a brief moment.

"I was going to do that."

"I'm aware."

Anger flickers behind the confusion again. "Then why would you..."

"You were incorrect in your assessment," Hannibal interrupts. "You are alone, Tobias. I received your message after you killed the trombonist, and I did not contact you for a reason. I have no interest in being your friend."

Hannibal expects Tobias to toss aside his jacket, to bare his teeth in a snarl. The garrote is a bit of a novel weapon, but not entirely a surprise, given Tobias' profession. And the way Tobias lunges for him, eyes dark and furious – Hannibal sees that written in the lines of his body as soon as he starts moving.

Still, expecting the assault doesn't make it any less painful to bear.

Jack and Beverly arrive as the paramedic is finishing her examination of him. "Mild concussion," she tells Jack, a diagnosis that Hannibal has already arrived at himself. His head is throbbing, his eyes refuse to focus for longer than a few seconds at a time, and his coordination, usually impeccable, is all but shot. He's able to hold gauze against the puncture wound in his thigh only because it requires pressure and no fine motor control.

He's aware that it could be much worse. The tears welling up in his eyes are mostly for show, and he isn't experiencing any loss of consciousness or confusion, though he blinks dazedly at Jack in greeting to give the impression that he is.

"Doctor Lecter." Jack's own expression is confused and more than a little curious. "I was hoping you could answer a few questions for me, regarding this whole..." He gestures at the room at large. "Fiasco."

Hannibal takes a breath and opens his mouth to ask if, perhaps, he could be granted some time to recover, to allow his mind to stop spinning, but Beverly beats him to the punch. "Really?" she demands, one eyebrow arched in evident disbelief. "Next time you get a concussion, I'll make sure someone interrogates you while you're still reeling. See how you like it."

Jack and Hannibal both blink at her in surprise, but the eyebrow stays arched. "Come on," she says. "He's one of us, Jack. Or close enough to it, at least. Cut him some slack?"

"I... suppose the questions can wait," Jack says slowly, turning back to face Hannibal. Behind him, Beverly rolls her eyes, and then returns to the evidence she was examining. "I'll call you, doctor."

Hannibal nods his agreement, and the paramedic grabs her bag. “You know the drill,” she says. “Come on. I’ve got tetanus boosters down in the truck.”

Walking is painful, but he manages to follow the paramedic down to the ambulance that’s waiting outside. Carefully, he lowers himself into a seated position at the rear of the vehicle, and then proceeds to shrug out of his jacket and unbutton his shirt enough to give access to his upper arm. By the time the paramedic is finished, exhaustion is making Hannibal’s eyes heavy, and it’s through sheer force of will alone that he’s keeping himself upright.

Now that everything is over, though, he should be able to go. He shifts, bracing himself, only to have the paramedic reach out and pat him on the shoulder. “You just sit tight,” she says. “I’ll be back in ten minutes or so. I want to check on that puncture wound and make sure you don’t need stitches.”

Hannibal decides he’s going to eat her liver.

He’s debating recipes when Beverly all but appears next to him, her hands in the pockets of her leather jacket. “Jack says hi,” she says by means of explanation, and Hannibal understands.

“My apologies.”

She raises one eyebrow at him. “For what?”

“I’m sure you have better things to be doing than this, Miss Katz.”

Beverly snorts her laughter, and Hannibal is reminded, inexplicably, of Will. “I didn’t get assigned babysitting duty, if that’s what you’re apologizing for. I know how the guys can be. I figured if I was the one to come over here and ‘keep an eye on you,’ you’d at least get some peace and quiet while you caught your breath.”

Hannibal blinks, startled by the unexpected kindness. Because that’s what it is, a kindness. There’s not an ounce of derision in Beverly’s expression, not a trace of mockery in her stance. He still has the urge to kill her, simply for having seen him in this vulnerable, weakened state, but it’s not quite as strong as he knows it should be

“You have my thanks,” he says, ducking his head slightly. “I am feeling much more... grounded. I should be able to drive myself home now.”

The wound in his leg has stopped bleeding. Even concussed, he can determine that he doesn’t need stitches – there’s no need for him to wait for the soon-to-be liverless paramedic to return. He goes to stand, and at the same time, Beverly pulls her hands out of her pockets. She doesn’t reach for him, but she does step in front of him, a disbelieving expression on her face. “Um, Doctor Lecter, I’m sorry, but there’s no way I can let you *drive yourself home* with a concussion. Is there someone I can call for you instead?”

No, Hannibal thinks immediately, and then, almost as quickly, he realizes that’s not exactly true. Not anymore.

“I can call someone,” he responds, but even as he begins to pull his phone out of his pocket he realizes that may not be the case. His hands are trembling, faintly, and when he looks at the screen he finds that his eyes fade in and out of focus with enough intensity to make navigation impossible.

He grits his teeth. There is no amount of self-control or strength of will that can override a concussion, and while he seems to have escaped without any damage to his mental faculties, he cannot trust that things will remain that way. He needs to get home, sooner rather than later.

Beverly, of course, notices his hesitation, and holds out her hand. “Let me,” she says, her voice soft. “Who am I calling?”

There’s no way around it. Hannibal doubts Beverly will allow him to simply call a cab – kindness and caring are so very rarely worth the inconveniences they pose. But the more he argues, the longer he’ll have to remain.

Reluctantly, he hands her the phone. “The contact is saved as ‘Home.’”

Beverly spares him a glance, but doesn’t comment. Instead, she taps the screen a few times, and then holds the phone up to her ear, waiting as it rings.

Hannibal has barely taken two breaths when Beverly shifts almost imperceptibly, her eyes flicking over to Hannibal. “Hi,” she says. “This is CSI Beverly Katz. I’m here with Hannibal Lecter, who is fine, by the way. Don’t start freaking out on me.” She pauses, cocking her head a little as she listens. “Fine is relative. Fine enough to ask me to call you to come pick him up. He has a mild concussion and should not be driving. He’s at his office. I’m assuming you– okay, great.” Another pause. “He’s walking and talking, he can tell you what happened. Can I get a name to give to the perimeter? They’ll need to know to let you in.”

Beverly shifts, tucking the phone between her shoulder and her ear so that she can pull her notepad out of her pocket. “Will Graham,” she says, and scribbles it down. “All right, thirty minutes. I’ll let them know to look out for you. Do you want to– okay. Yep. Hold on.”

Beverly holds the phone out, her palm covering the microphone. “He might be freaking out a little bit,” she says gently. “I’m gonna go take care of this.” She hands him the phone, waving the notebook as her parting excuse, and then leaves.

Hannibal swallows, raising the phone to his ear. Whatever Will is, Hannibal very much doubts *freaking out* is it, or even begins to describe it. “Will?”

“*Are you okay?*”

Will’s voice is urgent but controlled, and the sound of it is more welcome than Hannibal anticipated. The tears in his eyes, suddenly, are no longer for anyone’s benefit. He closes his eyes against them, leaning a little more heavily against the side of the ambulance. “No major injuries,” he says. “Bruised ribs, minor abrasions. The concussion.” He pauses. “A small puncture wound in my thigh.”

There's silence on the other end of the line for a moment, and when Will speaks again, the urgency has left his voice. It's still even, still controlled, but there's an undercurrent of ice that sends a shiver up Hannibal's spine. *"What happened, Hannibal?"*

"There was an altercation with a patient and an acquaintance of his."

It's vague. Hannibal isn't sure if anyone is around the ambulance, isn't sure who could be listening in, and he doesn't want to explain about Franklyn, about Tobias, when he could be overheard. Judging by the sharp breath Will takes, however, he doesn't need it to be spelled out for him. Hannibal has, after all, only mentioned one patient to him.

Will lets out a sharp, harsh breath. *"I'll be there in half an hour,"* he says. *"A cab is bringing me in. Just... sit tight. I'll see you soon."*

Will arrives, as promised, a half-hour later.

Jack is the one to escort him from the perimeter to the ambulance. As they approach, Hannibal can see the questions burning in Jack's mind, questions that, sooner or later, will have to be answered.

Who is Will Graham? Who is he to you? How did you two meet? Why is he living with you?

But answers will come at a later date. The concussion has earned him a grace period, some time to think and get himself in order, and Hannibal plans to take shameless advantage of it.

That's about as far as he gets before he sees Will.

Will is the picture of concern. The line of his jaw is tense, his eyebrows drawn together, his cheeks flushed, and the hands stuffed into his pockets are curled into fists. He looks like he's walking slow enough to keep stride with Jack out of sheer force of will that may be on the edge of breaking.

But when his eyes land on Hannibal, it's not worry that flashes behind them. No, the brief flicker of emotion Hannibal sees is darker, sharper, much closer to anger than it is to anything else. It's there and gone again before he can blink, something easily dismissed as nothing more than a trick of the light, but Hannibal knows better.

Whatever emotion that's simmering inside Will may be contained, may be temporarily leashed, but it's not controlled. Given half a chance, it will spill over, make Will *slip*, not into the mind of a killer, but out of his human veil, his person-suit. It won't happen here, in front of Jack and the gathered onlookers, but later, when they're alone?

You're used to being the most dangerous person in the room. And darlin', that's just not the case anymore.

"Jesus, Hannibal."

Will's fingers are warm and startlingly gentle as they tilt his chin up, and his eyes, when Hannibal meets them, are soft. "Hey," Will murmurs, shifting to brush his thumb over

Hannibal's cheek. Hannibal is alarmed to feel tears well up anew at the tender gesture. "You with me?"

Hannibal nods tightly, and Will's expression goes drawn, his lips pressing together into a thin line for a brief moment before they even out again. "Let's get you home," he says quietly, the hand that's not caressing Hannibal's face sliding around one of the man's wrists. "Come on."

Hannibal allows himself to lean against Will, just a little, as they walk away from the ambulance. It's mostly for Jack's benefit – there are certain ways that Hannibal is expected to react to the situation, after all – but the white-knuckled grip Will has on his wrist eases a little when Hannibal leans against him, too.

Aside from the fingers wound tight around his wrist, Will remains fairly placid until they make it to the Bentley. He opens the passenger side door for Hannibal before sliding in behind the wheel himself, and it's only once they've pulled out onto the street that Will finally allows himself to slip, the barely-restrained emotion rising to the surface as his entire body goes stiff, the lines of him practically thrumming with tension.

"Explain."

Will's voice is flat, toneless. His fingers are curled around the steering wheel like they were wrapped around Hannibal's wrist, though Will seems to be showing less consideration for the leather than he had for Hannibal's skin. Hannibal makes a mental note to check the leather for crescent-shaped gouges, later.

He clears his throat. "It seems Tobias Budge was less than appreciative of your tableau. He confronted me, and the patient he'd used to send his message."

Will turns his head sharply. "Budge is the one who attacked you?"

Hannibal nods.

"Where is he now?"

"In the BSU's morgue, I imagine. Or at least en route."

Will sucks in a breath, and then, slowly, lets it out. "You killed him?"

Hannibal stops himself from frowning, but only just. He's not sure if it's disappointment in Will's voice, or if that's his own concussed brain interpreting things incorrectly. There's no reason for Will to be disappointed, unless he was planning on killing Tobias himself, but that's not the Mimic's modus operandi.

"He left me little choice," Hannibal replies stiffly. "Leaving him alive would have ended with far too many questions."

"Good."

Will's voice is vehement, almost a snarl in its intensity. His fingers flex on the steering wheel, and then, abruptly, one of them drops away, going instead to wrap around the back of

Hannibal's neck. His thumb settles over Hannibal's pulse, rubbing small, jerky circles over it, and the rest of his fingers curl against Hannibal's skin, not hard enough to bruise, but hard enough that Hannibal can feel each individual finger.

Oh, Hannibal thinks, and blames his concussion for not realizing it sooner. He expected anger, expected fury, but that's not what Will is suppressing, what he's trying so hard to keep a tight leash on.

I want everything.

Possessiveness, when Hannibal has encountered it, has always left a sour taste in his mouth: perhaps because his relationships have been, in large, nothing more than glorified smoke screens, or perhaps because the thought of someone he considers his inferior claiming him in any way is, simply, anathema. But once again, he finds himself making an exception for Will. Will is not a stitch in his person-suit, and Hannibal hasn't mistaken him for *inferior* since he let his facade drop that first time in the Bentley.

On Will, possessiveness makes arousal flood Hannibal's veins, sharp and sweet and sudden. The encounter with Tobias and the subsequent show he'd been forced to put on for Jack and the other agents has left him feeling strangely on-edge, empty, almost, and the sudden rush of *something* is enough to have his heart thundering in his chest, his cock twitching in his pants. He shivers, and the hand on his neck tightens minutely before relaxing again, Will's thumb a constant, steady pressure on his pulse.

They remain like that for the rest of the drive back to the house: Hannibal, with his eyes half-closed against exhaustion, and Will, with his hand pressed firmly against the back of Hannibal's neck. Will only shifts once the car has come to a halt, and then it's only so that he can get out of the car and go around to Hannibal's side and open his door.

"Come on," he says, holding out his hand. "Let's get you inside."

Will stays close, though his hand stays planted firmly in the middle of Hannibal's back, a steady, supportive presence, but nothing more. It remains there as he unlocks the front door with Hannibal's keys, remains as he ushers Hannibal in through the door, and then drops away as he closes the door behind them.

"Upstairs," Will says. "Bedroom."

There's no uncertainty in Will's tone, no room for argument, and Hannibal finds that he has no desire to argue. He makes a sound of acknowledgement, and then he makes his way up the stairs to his bedroom. Somewhat reluctantly, he turns on the light and examines himself in the mirror, taking stock of his injuries now that the adrenaline from the fight has well and truly worn off.

He's in the process of attempting to shrug out of his jacket when Will walks in behind him.

The younger man immediately makes a sharp sound in the back of his throat, shaking his head as he goes over to Hannibal. "Take it easy," he says, drawing the jacket down off Hannibal's shoulders before setting it aside on the nearby chaise. When Hannibal reaches up

to begin on the buttons of his shirt, Will makes the sound again, reaching up to put his own hands over Hannibal's.

For a moment, neither of them move. Will just keeps Hannibal's hands pinned against his chest, and Hannibal... lets him, waiting for the other man to gather his thoughts enough to voice what it is he needs to say. Eventually, Will clears his throat, his fingers curling over Hannibal's.

"Tell me to fuck off, or let me take care of you."

Will's voice is even, measured, and Hannibal has no doubt that if he were to go with the first option presented to him, if he told Will to *fuck off*, Will would. He would retreat to the privacy of his own room and leave Hannibal to lick his wounds in peace. And Hannibal is practiced at taking care of himself, at piecing himself back together – it's not a matter of him being unable to.

Dropping his hands to his sides is a deliberate decision. From the soft, ragged breath Will lets out, Hannibal thinks Will understands the weight of it.

"All right," Will says. "All right."

Will undresses him carefully, methodically, making sure Hannibal's clothes don't drag against any of his wounds. He doesn't make a sound until Hannibal is almost entirely stripped down, his jacket, shirt, and shoes all removed and set aside. It's only when Hannibal's trousers slip down past his hips that Will hesitates, finally, stilling as the garment drops to the floor.

Hannibal closes his eyes as Will sucks in a sharp, harsh breath.

He's all-too aware of the sight that has Will all but frozen, his palms braced flat against Hannibal's hips. Hannibal has been hard since Will's hand first settled over the back of his neck, hot and possessive, and has been steadily leaking into his boxers for just as long. The silk is thoroughly ruined, soaked through, the sight of it made even more obscene by Hannibal's cock straining at the wet fabric.

Hannibal opens his mouth to explain, but Will doesn't give him a chance. His hands slide down Hannibal's thighs, over the silk of his boxers, and the sound he lets out is all low, rough need.

"Oh, *sweetheart*," Will murmurs, and an entirely involuntary shiver tears its way through Hannibal's frame. "You're so *wet*."

Hannibal has heard those words before, but never in a tone quite so breathless, quite so *reverent*. He shivers again as his cock twitches in the confines of his boxers, adding to the already significant mess.

"Will," he begins, but Will just shakes his head, his thumbs pressing into the divots of Hannibal's hips.

“Don’t. I said I’d take care of you, didn’t I?”

And perhaps it’s the exhaustion, or the lingering effects of the concussion, or perhaps it’s simply the fact that Will, without fail, has taken every new facet of Hannibal revealed to him in stride. Whatever it is, Hannibal finds himself nodding, the words of explanation dying in his throat.

And Will, the gleam in his eye sharp and focused, hooks his fingers under the waistband of Hannibal’s boxers and tugs. They join his trousers on the floor, and then Will’s hands are in his own, guiding him forward to step out of the pooled fabric.

“Come on,” Will says, gently tugging him towards the bed. “Why don’t you lay down for me?”

Hannibal obeys, swallowing against a sudden tightness in his throat when he realizes that’s what he’s doing. *Obeying*. He feels off-kilter, suddenly, unmoored – the previous night he was ready for Will, for claws and teeth and violence, and this unexpected tenderness, these endearments and gentle touches, have him reeling more than a little. But he does obey, laying back in the silk sheets when Will pulls the duvet back, and tries to center himself.

Will, again, doesn’t give him the chance. Almost immediately, he joins Hannibal on the mattress, kneeling in between his thighs and forcing Hannibal to let his legs fall open. Instinctively, Hannibal tries to close them again, but when Will shifts, it’s not to move away – it’s to lean up and wrap his fingers around the column of Hannibal’s throat.

Hannibal stills immediately, but Will doesn’t press down with his palm to cut off Hannibal’s airway or with his fingers to block his blood flow. Not yet, at least. He just leaves his hand there, a warm, comfortable weight, until Hannibal slowly allows the tension to bleed out of his frame. As he relaxes back into the mattress, Will’s lips curl into a smile.

“There you go,” he murmurs. “Beautiful.”

The first, unexpected touch of Will’s fingers to his cock sends a sharp jolt of pleasure up Hannibal’s spine. It isn’t tentative or exploratory – Will’s fingers wrap around him sure and firm and stroke him from root to tip, spreading the slickness that has gathered at the head of his cock down the entire length of him.

And then, as soon as Hannibal’s mouth falls open in a gasp, Will leans down and kisses him.

There’s no mistaking it – the kiss is a claim, hot and possessive. Will licks into his mouth as he twists his hand around the head of Hannibal’s cock, bites at the swell of Hannibal’s lip as he strokes him, slow and hard. It’s how Hannibal touches himself, on the rare occasions that he does, and the familiarity of it coupled with the fact that it’s not his own hand has him spinning far closer to the edge than it should, far quicker than it should.

He tries to arch up into Will’s touch, to chase the friction at his own pace, and that’s when Will’s fingers tighten around his neck, hard enough to cut off a breath he’s halfway through taking. His own fingers curl into the silk sheets, twisting and desperate, and Will smiles against his cheek.

When he speaks, his voice is like salt and sandpaper, rich and rough and broken.

“He had no fuckin’ right to touch you.” Will’s fingers flex against Hannibal’s throat, as the hand on his cock speeds up, tightens its grip, and Hannibal feels his toes curling and his muscles tightening as his chest begins to burn. “And I’m so glad you killed him, baby, but god I wish I could have seen it.”

Hannibal feels it start to coil low in his abdomen, feels the way his stomach sinks in and up as Will keeps touching him, keeps stroking him. He squirms, his mouth falling open as he tries to draw in air, and the hand that’s curled around his throat loosens just a hair, just enough to let Hannibal suck in a ragged breath.

“*Will.*”

“Let it happen,” Will says softly, his lips moving against the curve of Hannibal’s jaw. “I’ve got you, sweetheart.”

He swipes his thumb over the head of Hannibal’s cock once, twice, and scrapes his teeth over the fluttering of his pulse, and Hannibal *comes* with a rough, startled cry.

The hand on his throat stops him from arching up as pleasure floods his synapses, but his hips still thrust into Will’s hand, seeking out more friction even as he spills over Will’s fingers in short, heavy pulses. The scent of his own release immediately fills his nose, bitter and sharp, and Will strokes him through it, peppering his jaw with soft, barely-there kisses until Hannibal begins to twitch and shiver in sensitivity.

“So good for me,” Will murmurs, and he stops stroking, but he doesn’t stop touching.

The hand on Hannibal’s throat remains, a gentle, steady pressure, but Will’s other hand, covered in Hannibal’s spend, slips down between his legs. At the first brush of Will’s fingers against his hole, Hannibal jerks, squirms, wanting to press into the touch and shy away from it all at the same time, and Will, ever-observant, huffs laughter against the side of his neck.

“Oh, sweetheart,” he says. “You didn’t think I was gonna stop at one, did you?”

In the echoes of his mind Hannibal hears *And I don’t trust you to know where to draw the line*. Distantly, he wonders what’s changed, if *anything’s* changed. If, really, there is a line for him to draw.

Even more distantly, he supposes that might be exactly what Will meant.

One finger circles the rim of Hannibal’s entrance, teasing with barely-there pressure, spreading the slickness of his own release over his skin. Hannibal’s cock, still hard in the wake of his orgasm, twitches at the stimulation. It’s too soon, *far* too soon, but Will and his body both seem content to ignore that fact.

Licking his lips, Hannibal does his best to find his voice. “Will, I—”

“I’ve got you.”

The hand on his throat leaves so that Will can open the drawer in the bedside table and fish out the half-full bottle of lubricant inside. He pops the cap and drizzles some over his other hand, the one already slick with Hannibal's come, and then sets the bottle down. His eyes flick to Hannibal's face, then, startlingly blue in the dim bedroom light, and his lips twist into a soft smile as the hand slick with lube dips back between Hannibal's legs.

One finger immediately sinks into Hannibal up to the second knuckle, and Hannibal, sensitive and still feeling his first orgasm, sucks in a harsh breath. Will just smiles wryly, his free hand coming to rest lightly on Hannibal's hip. "You all right there, darlin'?"

He thrusts his finger in gently as Hannibal swallows, his throat dry. "Perfectly fine," he manages to respond, and Will's smile widens, showing teeth.

"Oh, yeah?" A second finger teases at Hannibal's rim, too soon, but the burn of it pushing into him is just as sweet as the pleasure of being stretched, of being filled. And judging from the way Will's smile morphs into a smirk, Hannibal guesses that he's all-too aware of the fact that the pain is stoking the fire in Hannibal's belly higher. "I think we can shoot for a little more than 'fine', can't we?"

A keening cry slips from Hannibal's mouth as Will abruptly curls his fingers, rubbing them firmly over the swollen rise of his prostate. His cock, once again flushed and hard, spurts slick precome against his belly. He squirms, trying to rock back against Will's fingers, to drive them deeper and Will's breathless, pleased chuckle is almost as responsible for the sharp curl of pleasure as the resulting stimulation to his prostate is.

"That's it," Will murmurs. "That's it, sweetheart. God, you're pretty like this." He twists his hand, curling his fingers sharply as he presses his thumb against Hannibal's perineum, and Hannibal's second orgasm tears through him so abruptly that his vision whites out for one long, drawn-out moment.

When he comes back to himself, chest heaving and body trembling, Will is kissing his cheeks, his forehead, murmuring soft words that Hannibal can hear but doesn't truly understand. One hand is stroking through Hannibal's hair, gentle and soothing, and the other, it takes him a moment to realize, is still buried deep inside him. Three fingers now, not two.

Hannibal's breath catches in his throat, and finally, tears spill over from his eyes. He shivers, shakes, and lets out a soft, plaintive sound as Will's fingers curl again, brushing over a prostate that's now incredibly oversensitive and tender to the touch. "Will," he rasps, his voice all but wrecked.

"Shh, darlin'." Will brushes a kiss over his mouth before sitting up. His fingers slip from Hannibal's body, and Hannibal watches, bleary-eyed, as Will quickly strips down, discarding his own clothes over the side of the bed before his attention returns to Hannibal. "Hey," he says, reaching up with his clean hand to brush his thumb through one of the tear tracks on Hannibal's face. "I know. It's a lot. But you're doing so good, sweetheart. I think you can manage one more for me, can't you?"

He waits as Hannibal blinks, dazed. Hannibal's entire body feels like a live-wire, like any touch will be enough to ignite him, but there's *want* in Will's eyes, desire burning so brightly

that Hannibal feels it like it's his own. Another orgasm, if Will manages to pull one from his oversensitive body, will likely blur the edges between pleasure and pain, will likely consume him from the inside out.

“*Oh*,” he manages, his voice broken. “Please, Will.”

Will’s eyes flash, and then he’s shifting, leaning down to drag a kiss over Hannibal’s mouth. “Perfect,” he whispers. “Fuck, you’re perfect.” And then his cock is nudging against Hannibal’s entrance, and Hannibal’s world shrinks down to the places where Will is touching him.

Hannibal is stretched, and Will has slathered the both of them with lubricant, but the first push of his cock still burns, still makes Hannibal gasp against Will’s lips. But Will doesn’t give him any room to breathe, doesn’t give him time to adjust. He doesn’t stop until he’s bottomed out, either, until his hips are flush with Hannibal’s ass and Hannibal is shaking from how his body is responding to the sudden, overwhelming intrusion.

Will has carved out a space for himself inside Hannibal’s body, and it’s not his hand wrapped around Hannibal’s beating heart or his tongue slick with Hannibal’s blood, but it’s *good*. It’s right. He wants to bottle the feeling, wants to tuck it away so he can pull it out later and savor it, like the burn of whiskey on a cold night, a small pain to suffer for a greater pleasure.

“*Fuck*.” Will’s voice is rough, littered with gravel, and Hannibal thinks that maybe he understands about blood and burning as well. Will begins to move, grinding his hips forward in short, sharp little motions, and every movement has Hannibal gasping, twisting, trying to curl in on himself only to find that Will is there, in his space, in the way.

When Will gives his first proper thrust, Hannibal *keens*, his hands flying up to claw at Will’s back, to grip his hair, to try to pull him closer.

Will does not avoid his tender prostate. If anything, he angles his thrusts so that the head of his cock scrapes over the swollen bud with every thrust, sending sparks of pleasure-pain shooting up Hannibal’s spine. And he’s not tentative, either. He *fucks* Hannibal, snapping his hips and grinding into him, driving them both higher, towards a precipice Will intends to throw them off together. When he reaches between them to wrap his fingers around Hannibal’s leaking cock, the older man lets out a rough, shaky sob. He’s hard again, *aching* again, and Will strokes him furiously in time with his thrusts.

He comes, dry and sobbing, when Will snarls and sinks his teeth into the meat of his shoulder.

He’s still shaking with the aftershocks when Will comes a handful of thrusts later, stilling with his cock and teeth both sunk deep into Hannibal. Hannibal feels him pulse, feels the hot spill of him, and feels when his teeth release their grip on his muscle. When Will pulls back, his mouth is bloody, and Hannibal trembles violently at the sight.

Oh, Will.

For all his teeth are bloody, when Will kisses him, he's gentle, coaxing Hannibal's lips into moving against his own. They share the taste of iron between them, Hannibal's blood coating the inside of both their mouths.

Hannibal is unable to fully contain his wince as Will pulls out, though the kiss distracts him from the worst of it. Will pecks him on the lips again before he leans back, bloody lips curling into a soft smile. "Don't move," he says. "I'll be right back."

Hannibal is fairly certain that he couldn't move even if he wanted to.

He closes his eyes, letting himself relax back into the mattress as he lets himself drift, and between one breath and the next Will leaves and returns, bringing with him a warm, wet washcloth. He immediately sets to cleaning up the worst of the mess clinging to Hannibal's skin, the come drying on his stomach and between his legs, careful as he can be with Hannibal's current hypersensitive state.

The washcloth he tosses aside to join his own clothes on the floor, and then his arms are sliding under Hannibal's body and lifting. Hannibal stiffens, startled, but Will doesn't take him far, only moving him across to the other side of the bed before gently laying him back down. At Hannibal's confused, questioning glance, he smiles crookedly. "You seem like the type to mind the wet spot," he says, shrugging one shoulder. "Next time I'll remember to put down a towel."

Next time.

Hannibal shivers at the thought, his overworked body trying and failing to produce a response. Will laughs softly, and then slides into bed himself before drawing the duvet up over them both. As he settles on his back, Hannibal feels the strong urge to reach out and touch him, to keep contact - as if he hadn't just received an overt amount of that. He's prepared to grit his teeth against the urge and thoroughly stamp it out, and then Will shifts, raising the arm closest to Hannibal and looking over at him.

"C'mere, sweetheart," he says. "Let me hold you?"

It's phrased as a question. Hannibal could decline, if he so desired.

He does *not* desire. He closes the gap between them, laying his head on Will's chest and sliding one arm around his waist. Will makes a soft, pleased sound, and the hand he moved settles comfortably in Hannibal's hair, his fingers starting to comb gently through the strands.

For a moment, there's silence.

"You never told me what you thought of my serenade."

Exhaustion is tugging at Hannibal's mind, but Will's words force some clarity back into his thoughts. He works his jaw, swallowing against a dry throat and mouth, and tries to put what he felt at the scene into words. Given all that's happened in the interim, a few words of praise no longer seem entirely enough.

After a few moments, he shifts, rubbing his cheek slightly against Will's clavicle. The hand in his hair tightens for a moment, instinctively, and then loosens in the next breath, the fingers returning to their gentle, soothing motion. Hannibal sighs, soft, happy.

"I played her," he says, and he feels the way Will shivers, a ripple that passes through his entire body. His own voice is rough, ragged, but it gains stability as he continues. "I fed Jack a story about the killer striking again if he wasn't successful so that I could put my hands on the instrument you left for me and pull a sound from her myself." It goes without saying, he thinks, that he did not grant Tobias Budge's instrument the same pleasure, but he wants to be sure Will understands.

Shifting, he curls his fingers over the rise of Will's rib cage, and chooses his words carefully. "Jack's team played Tobias' victim, back at their lab. I'm told it was an interesting sound."

Will lets out a shaky breath, and Hannibal hides his smile against his skin.

"Get some sleep, darlin'," Will says after a moment, his voice a half-register deeper than it was the last time he spoke. "I'll wake you up in a few hours, make sure you're all right."

Hannibal hums, and as sleep pulls at his eyes again, he wonders what Will's next tableau will look like. He wonders, distantly, how he would step into the Ripper, and what kind of scene he would leave for Jack and his team.

And, with a twist of pleasure so sharp it borders on pain, he wonders what pieces of his kill Will would bring home to their table.

Chapter End Notes

nine thousand words later...

would it be possible to stretch someone's costal cartilage that much? I don't know for certain because I DIDN'T TRY, but my guess is that, maybe, if the person had an underlying connective tissue disorder like EDS that affected the quality of the collagen or elastin within the cartilage, said cartilage could perhaps be coaxed into interesting shapes after judicious application of certain chemicals? I don't know. I'm a programmer, not a doctor. or a serial killer.

I *do*, however, know that my search history is never going to recover from this fic. my targeted ads are already getting, uh, interesting.

but hey look we earned our explicit rating!

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

“You’re going to make a lovely muse one day,” Will says against Hannibal’s lips, pressing the words into his mouth, and Hannibal feels heat coil in his chest, slow and sure and solid.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

That evening finds the two of them in the kitchen, with Will preparing a simple carbonara and Hannibal seated at the counter, giving directions on how to properly cut pieces of a pig breeder pancetta.

Hannibal can’t remember the last time he watched someone cook in his kitchen. He’s not actually sure if he ever has. There have been dinner parties where he’s hired staff to act as his sous chefs, to work *alongside* him, and he’s recruited Alana and Jack to fill the same role a handful of times on the occasions he’s had them over.

This is not *that*. This is Will, with a pair of gray sweatpants slung low on his hips and a thin t-shirt stretched over his chest, standing alone in Hannibal’s kitchen, cooking for the both of them. For all that Hannibal is directing him, telling him how much pecorino to grate and how many egg yolks to separate, Will is the one carrying the dish out, start to finish.

It’s an odd change of pace. Hannibal expects to to dislike it on principle, but he finds that no part of him objects to Will being in his kitchen, using his utensils and ingredients. It doesn’t feel like an imposition, like Will is an outsider intruding on Hannibal’s inner sanctum. He follows Hannibal’s instructions to the letter without question, deferring to Hannibal’s expertise with an easy smile and a relaxed set to his shoulders, and if Hannibal hadn’t seen him with blood in his teeth and cold fire in his eyes he wouldn’t hesitate to answer his own question.

Are you uncertain which of us is the dominant personality?

Now, he thinks that, perhaps, it’s neither and both all at the same time.

He isn’t the only one watching Will cook. The door to the dining room is open, leaving room for Winston to lay and be as close as possible to Will while obeying the letter, if not the spirit, of Hannibal’s one dog-related rule. But Hannibal finds that he doesn’t truly have any complaints about the dog either – every so often he catches Will glancing over at the mutt out of the corner of his eye, his jaw working as he fights to keep from smiling even more broadly, and Hannibal lets himself stare, unashamedly.

As Will tosses the pancetta into the pan, Hannibal takes out his phone. He's never purchased a dog collar before, but he knows how to gauge a measurement by sight, and he knows how to judge quality based on a photo; he browses a few sites before settling on one that does custom work, and while Will beats the egg yolks and pecorino together, he composes an email with his requests.

Three is, perhaps, a little excessive, and a dangerous precedent to set if Will decides to make bringing strays home a habit. Hesitating, Hannibal glances over at the dog, and then at Will, and then back down at his phone.

No, what he told Will was correct. They can't have Winston looking like a stray.

He presses *send*.

"I assume there's a proper way of plating this?"

Hannibal shifts his gaze to the pan on the stove, where the finished carbonara sits, the pasta and cheese sauce still steaming lightly. Will has removed it from the hot burner and is waiting for his instruction, and Hannibal is suddenly certain that he could walk Will through a twelve-step plating process and Will would simply go along with it, for no reason other than the fact that Hannibal told him to, that Hannibal wanted him to.

Neither and both indeed.

"Plating is a lesson for another day," he says instead. "Use what you wish."

Will arches an eyebrow at him, but he doesn't comment. Turning around, he goes to the cabinets and takes out two shallow plates, setting them separately on the counter before lifting the pan. He divides the pasta evenly, and while there's no artistry to the plating, he doesn't make a mess, either.

"Come on."

Will carries their plates out to the dining room, and Hannibal follows with their glasses of water. Will had refused him wine, citing his concussion, and then had had the gall to laugh at him when his mouth curled in distaste. A glass of wine with dinner is a habit he's become accustomed to over the years, and sitting down without it feels... odd.

Will, seated at his left, nudges his foot under the table. "It's just for a few days," he says, a grin stealing over his face as he leans over, laying one hand flat on the table near Hannibal's plate. "I promise I'm tolerable even without alcohol."

Hannibal huffs a breath of laughter despite himself. "*Tolerable* is not the word I would use," he replies, hesitating for a moment before he allows himself to brush his fingers over the back of Will's hand, the gesture belying his words.

"Just eat your dinner." Will's words are annoyed, but his eyes, when Hannibal looks up, are shining. Hannibal can feel the joy radiating off him like it's a physical thing, and he basks in it. The people who dine at his table are usually happy, but there are always games being

played and masks being worn, and while that's enjoyable in its own right, Will's unfiltered delight is a true pleasure.

He picks up his fork, and lets his other hand settle comfortably over Will's.

Will all but herds him into the study after dinner, and Hannibal doesn't understand at first – any socializing done in his study is almost always accompanied by a glass of bourbon or cognac – but then Will stretches out on the sofa and spreads his knees just enough for Hannibal to realize exactly what he wants.

Sighing, Hannibal settles himself in between Will's spread legs and leans back against him, back to chest. Will's arms come up to wrap around his waist, a happy, content little noise escaping his throat as his cheek comes to rest against Hannibal's hair.

“How are you feeling?”

Hannibal considers the question. His body hurts, though not enough to indicate anything is seriously wrong. He has a low-grade headache that sits behind his eyes, and the various cuts, scrapes, and bruises littering his body ache, but other than the lingering fatigue, that is the extent of it.

“Exhausted,” he says, half because it's true, and half because he's curious about the reaction it will pull from Will.

Will hums, shifting so that he can hook his chin over Hannibal's shoulder, and his arms tighten almost imperceptibly around Hannibal's waist. The older man's lips twitch into a smile. Will's overt possessiveness, all bloody teeth and snarled words, was one thing – this is the other side of the same coin, the gentle to balance the sordid, and it comes to Will just as easily.

“I'll try not to keep you up too late.”

Hannibal laughs under his breath. “If you did, it would be you calling patients tomorrow to cancel their appointments.”

“Oh, yeah?” Will shifts, dragging his nose against the curve of Hannibal's jaw. “And here I thought I was going to have to talk you into taking some time off.”

Hannibal almost laughs again, and then he realizes that, if Will had tried, he likely would have been successful. “I was attacked in my place of work,” he says, by means of explanation. “Certain responses are... expected. If I don't exhibit at least moderate signs of post-traumatic stress for an acceptable period of time, questions may arise.”

“I'm not complaining,” Will murmurs. “Not at all. It'll give you a chance to get to know the stray I brought into your house.” He pauses, and Hannibal feels him shift, not quite a *slip*, but still an adjustment. “I don't think I ever thanked you for that.”

Hannibal thinks about dismissing Will's thanks. It *is* unnecessary – however, he doubts saying as much will have the effect he desires (and how odd it is, wanting to truly reassure).

"You stopped wearing your aftershave," he says after a moment. "I haven't smelled it on you since the first night you were here."

If Will is thrown by the sudden change of topic, he doesn't show it. "You didn't like it," he says immediately. "You didn't say anything, but I could tell. It bothered you."

"You valued my pleasure over your own?"

Will huffs, but Hannibal can feel his smile, curved against the skin of Hannibal's own jaw. "If you want to be dramatic about it. It's not like it meant anything to me. The cost-benefit analysis there came out heavily in favor of your nose."

Hannibal feels his mouth twist into something resembling a smirk, and he doesn't say anything. For a moment, there's silence between them, and then Will sucks in a breath and says, "*Hannibal*, that's not the same thing!"

"I fail to see the difference."

Will leans forward so that he can catch Hannibal's eyes. "Really? On the one hand, we have aftershave and an olfactory response. On the other, we have a dog and a *goddamn house*."

"That is not the correct comparison," Hannibal says. "A more accurate assessment of the second case weighs your comfort and happiness against a few possessions."

Will's mouth snaps shut with an audible click.

"The analysis came out heavily in your favor," Hannibal says dryly.

Will sits back, turning his face into Hannibal's neck. For a moment, neither of them speak, and then Will takes a long, stuttering breath and tightens his arms around Hannibal's waist for a half-second. "Sap," he murmurs, and the both of them pretend that Will's voice isn't a good deal rougher than it was the last time he spoke. "But I'm not complaining. Winston is happy, too."

At the sound of his name, Winston perks up from where he's laying in the doorway. He stretches, yawns, and then pads over carefully before pushing his nose against Hannibal's leg. He sniffs once, black nose twitching, before he huffs and gives a sharp shake of his head.

"Apparently, you smell bad," Will mutters, his grin audible in his voice.

Hannibal resists the childish urge to bare his teeth, reaching out one hand towards the dog. He offers the back of it for Winston to sniff again, and then slowly straightens his hand, intending to pet it over the soft-looking fur at the top of Winston's head.

Winston ducks away before he can, trotting over the other side of the room as Will, hiding his face against Hannibal's shoulder, tries and fails to choke back his laughter.

Hannibal sighs. “Winston is fortunate he is not the correct species to grace my dinner table.”

Will giggles again, and Hannibal finds any traces of irritation melting away at the sound. “Aw, it’s not his fault,” Will manages after a moment. “He’s had a rough time of it lately. Just give him some time, he’ll come around.”

Hannibal opens his mouth to respond, but he’s interrupted by a buzzing from his pocket. For a moment he considers ignoring it – it’s late, and he has had what could fairly universally be considered a *very stressful* day – but his curiosity wins out. He fishes his phone out of his pocket, holding it up so that Will can see the name flashing across the screen as well.

Jack Crawford.

“And that’s my cue.”

Far faster than Hannibal reasons he should be able to, Will extricates himself from underneath Hannibal, helping the other man settle back against the armrest of the sofa. “I’ll take Winston out,” he says, jerking his head towards the door. “Have fun. Winston, come.”

Hannibal swipes his thumb across the screen and lets the exhaustion he’s feeling bleed into his voice. “Jack. What can I do for you?”

Things change, and at the same time, they don’t.

The door to Will’s bedroom stays locked, but Will no longer spends his nights there. Winston claims the chaise in the corner of Hannibal’s room for his own, and Hannibal grows accustomed to seeing him there in the morning, fast asleep with his nose tucked under his own tail.

The FBI releases Hannibal’s office back to him, but he doesn’t return. He and Will agree on a two-month “buffer” to give Hannibal’s injuries time to heal and to keep up appearances, and Hannibal meets with Bedelia. He tells her about the attack, but not about Will. His own possessiveness, a thing with fangs and horns, comes to life in his chest at the thought of Bedelia trying to pick Will apart, even by the proxy of his own thoughts.

He’s not foolish enough to believe that he can keep Will to himself, not permanently, but he’s also in no hurry to reach that inevitable point.

Some nights, after dinner, Hannibal plays for Will. If it’s a harpsichord night, the younger man will lounge on the sofa, eyes closed, with a glass of scotch in his hand and an expression of the purest contentment Hannibal has ever seen on his face.

(Hannibal has immortalized that expression in a number of his sketches. Will, he discovers, is a hedonistic creature when left to his own devices, and will happily while away the mornings dozing in bed. Hannibal has always been an early riser, and the difference in their routines allows him many uninterrupted hours to sketch Will from memory, from the relaxed contours of his face when he’s listening to Hannibal play to the sharp lines of his body Hannibal

remembers from the night Will stood in his doorway, clinging to control by the skin of his teeth.)

If it's a theremin night, they'll sit together, with Will making himself small in that uncanny way he has so that Hannibal can wrap around him and guide his hands around the antennas. Will picks up the instrument's peculiarities quickly and learns how to coax it into producing pleasant melodies, but the vast majority of the time he'll lean into Hannibal's hands and let the older man guide his motions, allowing him to direct the song they discover.

It's on one of these nights that Will leans back against him, laying his head against Hannibal's silk pajama-clad shoulder so that he can look up at him. His expression is soft, placid, but there's a spark in his blue eyes that Hannibal has grown familiar with. Idly, he thinks he understands how the ancients could have mistaken their gods for walking among them; if the light catches Will just right, if his curls fall askew and that spark behind his eyes lingers, Hannibal sees the echoes of power in him. *He* knows it for what it is, sees Will's darkness and embraces it, but lesser men, in an older time?

They would have called out to him, though whether Will would have answered to *Pan* is another question entirely.

"I find myself wondering," Will says, breaking Hannibal out of his reverie, "who you were before this."

He gestures around them vaguely, the motion pulling a sharp, warbling tone from the theremin. A smile breaks out over his face, and he laughs, but it doesn't do anything for the sudden tightness in Hannibal's chest, for the way his throat constricts around his next breath. Will is inexorable, inevitable, and his presence in Hannibal's life is all but a guarantee, but something in him balks at the idea of telling Will about Mischa.

He thinks of that winter, of pale fingers and purple artichokes and the cold curl of revenge that had slaked his thirst and hadn't been nearly enough, all at the same time, and he thinks Will would understand. He *knows* Will would understand – it's in the man's nature. But he's unsure if he wants Will to understand him more, to know him any more intimately than he already does, at least for the time being.

At least until he can return the favor.

Will reaches up, brushing the backs of his fingers against Hannibal's jaw. "Hey," he says gently. "I don't need your life history in bullet points. Whatever you want to tell me, that's fine. I just want to know more about you."

Hannibal drops his hands away from the theremin, letting them fall to his sides. He startles when one of them brushes over something soft, and when he looks down he sees Winston leaning against the side of the bed, his chin resting on the mattress. He's looking up at Will, but he doesn't pull away when Hannibal's hand brushes over his back, tentative and gentle.

Just give him some time. He'll come around.

Hannibal sighs, but he lets his other arm curl around Will's bare waist, bringing the other man in closer against his body. Perhaps he'll keep Mischa to himself a little longer. But there are many aspects of his life between that winter and his current situation, and none of them make him hesitate, make his throat clench with emotion, when he thinks about telling Will about them.

"I studied at John Hopkins," he says, his fingers carding absently through Winston's fur. "When I finished my residency, I became a trauma surgeon."

"That makes a disturbing amount of sense." Will says. He nudges his nose against the delicate skin of Hannibal's neck, and Hannibal relaxes, just a little. "Why'd you stop?"

"I killed someone. Or, rather, I couldn't save someone. But it felt like killing them."

Will smiles. Hannibal can feel it. "You like your kills to be purposeful."

Being seen, Hannibal thinks, *is never going to become any less thrilling*. "It happened one time too many," he says. "The appropriate course of action was taken, and I transferred my passion for anatomy into the culinary arts."

Will snorts his laughter indelicately, and then apologizes with an open-mouthed kiss over Hannibal's pulse that makes gooseflesh break out over the older man's skin. "You're a brazen bastard," he says, nipping carefully at the spot he just kissed. "How many times have you used that line?"

Hannibal arches his neck with a hum, giving Will more room. "Almost as often as I tell people dining at my table that nothing there is vegetarian," he says, and Will laughs again, shaking his head and dragging his stubble over Hannibal's neck.

"Brazen," he repeats. "I like it."

Hannibal swallows as Will's teeth return to his neck, worrying a small mark over his pulse, and he thinks of Will's line of questioning. In normal relationships, it demands reciprocation, and while there is very little about their relationship that can be considered normal, Hannibal thinks it is worth the effort to try.

"You were hunting while hitchhiking, if I remember correctly." He adjusts the arm he has wrapped around Will's waist, spreading his fingers over the bare skin of Will's stomach, and Will hums, pleased. "I do not have the monopoly on impertinence."

Will's lips move soundlessly, and Hannibal knows without having to see that Will is mouthing the word against his skin while biting back a smile. *Impertinence*. He laughs after a moment, quiet and breathless. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," he drawls, and then licks over the mark he left. "People are warned against picking up hitchhikers for a reason, you know."

It's a neat deflection, and Hannibal lets it go. He has no desire to push Will, not truly, not over this – if Will does not wish to share his history, then he can keep it. Hannibal thinks of looking into Will himself, now that he has the man's last name, but the thought sits

uncomfortably, like an ill-fitting suit, and he dismisses it after only the briefest consideration. Will, like Winston, cannot be rushed.

He cannot help but wonder, though, if Will has his own memories of teeth and cold winter nights, tucked away into a safe corner of his mind. If there's a singular moment that he can pinpoint as the defining change.

Dragging himself back into the present moment, Hannibal turns his head, nudging his nose against Will's cheek. "Terribly dangerous, hitchhikers," he says, and his voice is dry but even he can't deny the obvious affection in it. "Clingy things, too."

Will bites at the jut of Hannibal's jaw, not hard enough to break the skin, but hard enough to sting. "Impossible to get rid of," he agrees. "God help you if you bring them home."

Hannibal chuckles as he turns, pressing Will back against the mattress. The younger man goes willingly, pliant under Hannibal's hands, until Hannibal is braced above him, their bodies pressed together from chest to toe. Will smiles, raising his chin a little, and Hannibal acquiesces, leaning down to give him the kiss he's asking for.

"My dear," he says after a moment, lips brushing Will's, "I believe we're both beyond God's help at this point."

Will hums, stretching, arching his back to press the entirety of himself against Hannibal. He's half-hard in his boxers, and Hannibal isn't far behind, the silk of his pajama pants a cool glide against rapidly heating skin. It's pleasant in a lazy sort of way, arousing and comforting almost in equal amounts. Hannibal, who has never found sex *comforting* once in his life, finds himself sinking happily into it, into *Will*, in these little stolen moments.

Will reaches up, sliding his hands into Hannibal's hair. He doesn't pull, just musses the strands before dragging Hannibal down for another kiss. "You're going to make a lovely muse one day," he says against Hannibal's lips, pressing the words into his mouth, and Hannibal feels heat coil in his chest, slow and sure and solid.

Hannibal rocks his hips down, and Will sucks in a breath, his fingers tightening in Hannibal's hair for a moment before they loosen, flattening against his skull. "One day?" Hannibal asks, repeating the motion, his voice nearly a purr. This time, Will groans, his eyes fluttering shut.

"Fuck, just..." Will scrabbles for Hannibal's hip with one hand, holding him in place so that he can rock up, the line of his cock hard and thick against Hannibal's own. Hannibal kisses Will's next moan from his mouth, earning himself a stuttered, shaky roll of Will's hips and a warning tug to his hair.

"One day," Will repeats when he pulls back, his voice slightly breathless. "You know I have to save the best for last, darlin'. But don't worry." He pauses and takes a gasping breath, clutching at Hannibal, drawing him in closer, and Hannibal lets himself be drawn in, so that Will's next words are spoken against the shell of his ear. "I won't leave your pantry empty for long."

The noise Hannibal makes mostly closely resembles a snarl, though it has none of the violence, none of the rage. He makes it against Will's neck, presses it into his skin, and he doesn't think about Will's voice wrapping around *last* and what that could mean.

There is no ending for people like Will, for people like *them*. There is only change, evolution, *becoming*.

Will comes first, when Hannibal teases one sharp, pointed canine over the soft skin below his ear, spilling in his boxers with a cut-off groan and a grip so suddenly tight on Hannibal's hip that the older man knows there will be bruises come morning. He's barely finished shaking before he's slipping a hand between them, sliding it past the waistband of Hannibal's silk pants to wrap around his cock.

Hannibal's already wet, already *close*, and he barely manages a handful of thrusts into the slick heat of Will's hand before he's spilling as well, muffling his cry of pleasure in the crook of Will's neck.

After a moment, they untangle themselves from each other, both of them discarding their clothes before all but collapsing back into the bed. Will uses his discarded boxers to clean up the worst of the mess, and then he tucks himself in against Hannibal's side, head pillowed on his shoulder.

Hannibal looks down at him, takes in the flush of his cheeks, his dark, blown pupils, and his soft, lazy smile, and thinks about the things he would do to keep this, to keep *Will*, if pushed.

Will dozes, and Hannibal, who is accustomed to both getting up earlier *and* staying up later than Will, browses Tattle-Crime on his phone, checking Lounds' recent stories for anything of interest. Occasionally, if there haven't been any new killings of appropriate sensationalism, she'll rehash an old favorite; more often than not, her 'old favorites' are his.

It's very much like scrapbooking, only there's nothing Hannibal has to do himself to preserve the fond memories.

Will's only been asleep for twenty minutes or so when Hannibal's phone rings. It's already in his hand, so he's able to cut off the buzzing before it gets loud enough to wake the younger man. Irritation wells in his gut, though not overwhelmingly so.

He's familiar with Jack Crawford irritating him.

"Jack. Don't tell me you have another crime scene so soon."

"*Abel Gideon escaped from a transport vehicle*," Jack says, his voice clipped and hurried. "*We have it on good authority that he's going to go after the people, as he says, 'made him think he was someone else.' We'd like to send some uniforms over to your house as a precautionary measure.*"

Hannibal takes a breath. "Good authority?"

“Chilton. He was the last person Gideon spoke to before his escape. The last one that’s still alive, anyway.”

“I appreciate the warning, but my involvement with Gideon’s case really was tangential at most. If you have resources to spare, they’d be put to better use watching Alana or Chilton himself, or even Freddie Lounds.”

Will stirs at the sound of Lounds’ name, raising his head from Hannibal’s chest. He looks up at the older man, his sleepy expression quickly bleeding away into sharp curiosity as he realizes who Hannibal is on the phone with.

“I am, however, interested to hear about his escape, and the case,” Hannibal continues, his eyes meeting Will’s. “If you’re free, we’d love to have you for dinner.”

Chapter End Notes

my finish-date goal for this fic is the end of May. I did Summer of Whump last year for the Witcher ([*eternal lines to time*](#)) and had a blast, and I think I want to do it again this year for Hannibal. the angst potential is just too good. (the tentative whump collective title is *Pomegranate Tears*, because I know what I’m about).

if I keep writing this goddamn thing at work and don’t get distracted by this new multi-chapter season 1 murder-family idea I had, I think I’ll manage to stay on track. RIP my quarter-end productivity though. and my coworkers’ eyes, if they decide to be nosy at the wrong time.

(murder-family fic working title: *these violent memories and lethal delights*. I’m just a little bit in love.)

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Will makes for a dangerous compatriot; Hannibal can't begin to imagine the havoc he could wreak as a rival.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Will insists on helping Hannibal prepare for dinner, even though that means getting up with him the next morning before the sun has even begun to brighten the sky. He's sleepy, his eyes half-lidded as he hides yawns in the crook of his elbow, but his motions with the knife Hannibal hands him are precise, and his reply, when Hannibal questions him on it, is unamused.

"I'm not a guest here," Will drawls easily, sipping at his coffee as he stares at Hannibal over the rim of the mug. "Don't expect me to act like one."

Will turns back to chopping vegetables, and Hannibal has to brace himself against the sudden urge to reach out and drag him across the length of the counter to kiss the taste of the Southern lilt from his lips. Instead, he takes a steadying breath and simply nudges Will's coffee cup a little farther away from the edge of the counter before returning to the thigh of a particularly aggressive driver he's rubbing down with olive oil. The recipe isn't a complex one, but the shank will need to spend nearly all day slow-roasting in the oven, and there are other preparations Hannibal still needs to make.

"What did you tell Jack about me?"

Will's voice is still soft, still easy, though the question tugs sharply at Hannibal's focus. Having Jack over for dinner is a risk, of course. Even if the purpose of his visit is to discuss Abel Gideon, Will's presence will likely become its own topic of conversation.

"Nothing," Hannibal answers. "There was no need to fabricate a story, so I did not."

Will nods, his eyes on the vegetables. "Good," he says. "Let's keep it that way."

"He'll have questions."

Will glances up, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "I know. I trust you to give satisfying answers that keep us safe." He pauses. "Jack doesn't really care about who I am. He'll just want to know who I am to you."

Hannibal thinks about it for a moment. Jack, he's certain, will accept whatever words Hannibal chooses to use – boyfriend, partner, *lover* – but Hannibal is content with none of them. Even *patron* in reference to himself is no longer accurate, not completely.

Beloved.

Even in English, the word twists inside him, sharp and burning. His hands shake ever so slightly, and he has to dig the pads of his fingers into the meat to hide the motion from Will.

Hannibal is fluent in several languages. His English is accented, but his Italian is not – nor is his French, his German, or his Hungarian. His Greek and Polish are more than passable, and his Spanish, while the most recent of his language acquisitions, is coming along quite nicely. He speaks enough Russian that he could survive in the country, and he can apologize for not speaking the language in most of the languages he doesn't know.

Beloved.

Hannibal swallows against a language he hasn't spoken in decades, familiar and painful all at the same time. He does not deny his heritage, *cannot* deny it, not with the way it makes itself known in the cut of his features and the shape of his vowels, but he has tucked it away, not as a stitch in his person-suit but as the lining. Soft. Hidden.

There are two people living who have heard him speak in his native tongue. The thought of adding a third to their number thrills and terrifies him all at the same time.

Mylimasis.

Jack would not understand the gravity of the word. But Hannibal, with his shaking hands and his racing heart? He does.

Will, with the part of Hannibal tucked away in his own mind, would as well.

Hannibal huffs a thin, shaky laugh. "I'm not certain Jack will appreciate the nuances of our relationship."

Will's smile goes sharp. "I'm counting on it." he says. "When was the last time Jack was here?"

"Not for a few months," Hannibal answers. "The summer, perhaps. Why, is it important?"

Will shrugs one shoulder. "Maybe. You never know what might come up. Now, what can you tell me about Abel Gideon?"

Hannibal is laying jasmine flowers against delicate portions of foie gras when the doorbell rings. Winston, laying in the hallway between the kitchen and the foyer, scrambles to his feet and barks once, though any further noises are cut off by a sharp, displeased sound from Will.

"Very punctual," Will says, wiping his hands on a towel. He's changed, and while Hannibal appreciates the sight of him in slim black slacks and a light blue button-up, Will is *wound*.

Hannibal finds himself missing the relaxed lines of Will's body from earlier that morning, even if they'd been somewhat hidden beneath lower-quality fabrics.

"I'll get the door," Will continues, and then, before turning to go, he leans in across the counter to brush a kiss over Hannibal's cheek. "You ready?"

Hannibal makes an affirmative noise and doesn't drop the flower in his hand only because of the years he spent training his body on how to not react to surprise. Will smiles at him, something sparkling behind his eyes, and Hannibal thinks of his words from that morning.

Jack doesn't really care about who I am. He'll just want to know who I am to you.

He still has no satisfactory answer. *Partner*, he supposes, will suffice, though he can practically taste Will's disappointment in it.

He hears Will open the door, hears Jack's low tenor of a greeting, and then his slightly higher-pitched exclaim of surprise as Winston makes himself known. Hannibal smiles to himself, amused. Let Jack spend his time trying to figure *that* out.

Jack and Will come into the kitchen as Hannibal is putting the finishing touches on the plates. Will is smiling easily, and Jack looks as relaxed as he ever does – that is, not at all – but he's making no effort to keep Will in his line of sight.

"Jack," Hannibal greets warmly. "You're right on time. Please, have a seat in the dining room. I'll join you momentarily."

"I can do that," Jack says. His eyes flick over to Will, almost expectantly, and Hannibal bites his tongue against the urge to call Will to him for assistance with a task that does not exist.

Will can handle Jack Crawford. Will *has* handled Jack Crawford, time and time again, through his scenes. One dinner will not be his downfall..

Will plucks the bottle of wine Hannibal set aside off the counter before gesturing towards the dining room. "I'll pour," he says. "Might be the easiest task I've had all day, but I'm also fairly confident I can't mess it up."

Jack gives a low, soft laugh. "Did you help prepare what I'm about to be spoiled on?"

Hannibal hears the clinking of glasses as the two men settle at the table, the sloshing of liquid as Will pours the wine. "'Help' is probably an overstatement," he replies, demurely. "But yes, I had a hand in it. We've yet to see the results of said hand, but I'm hopeful."

Hannibal bites back a smile as he picks up the three plates and makes his way out to the dining room. "*Foie gras au torchon*," he announces, setting plates down in front of Jack and Will. They're seated opposite each other, leaving the space at the head of the table for Hannibal. "With a fig compote and five-spice tuille."

"Beautiful," Jack replies as Hannibal takes his own seat, "as always."

“Agreed.” Will’s eyes flick over to Hannibal. “Every meal he manages to outdo himself. It shouldn’t be possible, and yet...”

“Our Doctor Lecter certainly is one of a kind.”

Jack’s focus returns to his plate, so he doesn’t catch it, the blink-and-you-miss-it tightening of Will’s jaw, the flash of something cold behind his eyes. But Hannibal sees it, knows it for what it is. It’s bloody teeth and a hand around his throat and *darlin’* and *I want everything*. It’s Will’s possessiveness rearing its head at Jack’s casual *our*, bitten back and muted, but there behind Will’s eyes all the same.

It soothes something inside Hannibal to see it here, in the light of day, at his table.

“So,” Jack says after a few moments, the tone of his voice changing just enough that Hannibal immediately knows what’s about to come next. “I have to ask. How do you two know each other?”

Even anticipating the question, Hannibal finds himself stiffening instinctively. Jack is being unreasonably polite – Hannibal has seen him truly *question* the acquaintances of his coworkers, and when he’s suspicious, when he’s uncertain of their motives, he doesn’t pull his punches. This is Jack simply being curious, his investigator’s nature showing itself harmlessly.

Mostly harmlessly. No line of inquiry into Will can ever be truly harmless.

Still he’s prepared. He finds himself bristling visibly, drawing Jack’s attention towards himself, away from Will. “I don’t think–” he begins, but Will cuts him off by sliding his hand across the table to cover Hannibal’s own in a soothing, consoling gesture.

“It’s all right.” He smiles a little crookedly, first at Hannibal, and then at Jack. “I get it. You work with the FBI – if they weren’t curious about the guy you’re living with, I’d be a little worried myself.”

Hannibal freezes, mind whirling as he tries to process what caused this sudden change in plan. And then, as Will’s expression doesn’t falter, he realizes that there was no change in plan. For all Will is projecting mild discomfort and awkwardness at Jack, he’s not truly upset, not honestly uncomfortable. This had been Will’s plan all along. *Protective partner* is another stitch in Hannibal’s person-suit, one that fits in seamlessly with all the others.

And playing at submission is something Will does oh so well.

Jack has the good nature, at least, to look a little sheepish, but Hannibal sees the gears turning in his head at the same time as he parses Will’s response. Jack, for all his faults, is not a stupid man. *Be careful, Will*, Hannibal wants to say. *Do not let this one see you slip*.

“Most people take offense at the insinuation they’re being investigated.”

Will huffs a breath of laughter. “Most people,” he agrees. “Like I said, I get it. I made detective right around the time Han started working as a trauma surgeon.”

A little of the stoniness melts from Jack's expression. It's replaced with something else – shock, Hannibal thinks, likely at hearing the nickname spill from Will's lips – but Hannibal finds he's no longer focused on Jack Crawford. His attention, the entirety of it, has been drawn to Will.

“You're a cop?”

Will shakes his head quickly. “Ah, no. Not anymore.” He pauses, swallowing, and the gesture looks so genuinely uncomfortable, so honestly hesitant that Hannibal almost reaches out to lay his hand over Will's. He catches himself and keeps his hands to himself, not wanting to interrupt this show he's been granted the privilege of observing.

Will is himself. Hannibal can see his sharp edges and the fire behind his eyes, can see the flicker of humor that passes over his face when Jack reacts to the nickname. He can see the easy set to Will's shoulders and the steady beat of his pulse in his neck, and he realizes, with a start, that Will is telling the truth. *His* truth. This isn't a mask, isn't someone else's mind pulled on over his own for the sake of fooling Jack – this is Will Graham, muted, perhaps, scaled-back and reserved, but Will all the same.

Will clears his throat. “It took me a few years, but I realized police work really wasn't for me. Things affected me differently. It made the work... difficult.” He swallows again, and then smiles, though it doesn't quite reach his eyes.

And Jack falls, hook, line, and sinker. All at once, the suspicion dissipates from his expression, Will's willingness to admit to this vulnerability sealing the deal.

“Not everyone can compartmentalize effectively enough to work jobs like law enforcement,” Jack offers, his gruff voice a touch gentler than normal. “Giving a shit isn't a character flaw.”

Will laughs, a quick, harsh sound. “That's not a popular opinion. Or at least it wasn't when I was on the force. Compassion was seen as inconvenient at best.”

Their perceptions aren't my responsibility.

Hannibal wants to kiss him. Hannibal wants to *ravage* him. Will is effortlessly painting a picture for Jack, laying the foundation for trust and understanding based in similar history. At the same time, he's setting himself apart, explaining away any of the odd, divergent behaviors Jack might notice before they can ever become an issue. It's brilliant. Flawless.

“It got to be too much after a while,” Will continues. “After I quit, I kind of fell off the map for a bit to deal. I lost contact with a lot of people. Everyone at the precinct thought I'd gone soft, and everyone else couldn't understand why I'd just walked away from a solid career.” He pauses, and Jack nods in understanding. “So, I spent a while figuring out where I fit, what I like doing, and then, low and behold, I'm out setting up for a job and who stumbles across me except Hannibal Lecter.”

Hannibal forces himself to keep eating as he listens, even as his stomach seizes and his pulse throbs in his throat. He trusts Will's judgment, trusts him not to reveal anything to Jack that could be dangerous, but he doesn't know what line Will is walking, what story he's weaving

now. As far as he can tell, nothing Will's said so far has been a lie – it seems unlikely he would start mixing in untruths halfway into his story. And that is enough to have anxiety start to curl low in his abdomen, thick and acrid.

Hannibal doesn't want to kill Jack Crawford. Not yet. Not tonight.

"Setting up for a job?" Jack asks, and Hannibal holds his breath.

Will, on the other hand, smiles easily. Everything about him relaxes, like he'd much rather talk about this than his history as a police officer. "It's nothing fancy," he says. "I do reproduction paintings."

Imitation is the closest they're going to get to comprehension.

Hannibal is immediately, viscerally grateful that law enforcement couldn't keep their claws sunk into Will. If he'd stayed, he might have forced himself to try to change, to try to mimic someone like Jack Crawford instead. Will makes for a dangerous compatriot; Hannibal can't begin to imagine the havoc he could wreak as a rival.

"I travel a lot," Will continues, seemingly oblivious to Hannibal's internal turmoil. "I came out here a little while ago to work, but after Han ran into me he just... brought me home." Will's eyes flick over to Hannibal, soft affection dancing in them. "He wouldn't even let me bring up staying in a motel. And then I just... never left."

Jack glances between them, drawing the conclusions Will so carefully set up for him, and Hannibal realizes why Will wanted to know about the last time Jack dined at his table. Jack is doing his own mental calculations, determining how serious they are, how long Will has been a part of Hannibal's life. Whatever he arrives at will be incorrect, of course, but a few months reads a lot more *stable* than two weeks. "And the dog?" Jack asks finally, and Will laughs quietly, ducking his head as if embarrassed.

"I attract strays," he says. "Hannibal has been... very accommodating to my eccentricities."

Jack makes a sound, something between surprise and disbelief, shaking his head. "Then you must be something special," he says. "I thought I'd see hell freeze over before I saw a dog in Hannibal Lecter's house."

"Something special is one way of putting it," Hannibal murmurs, breaking into the conversation for the first time since Will's interruption. Will's eyes flick up to his, blue and bright and smiling.

"If it's not too much trouble, I'd love to see your work after dinner."

Will's eyes linger on Hannibal's face for a moment before he turns to look at Jack. "I'd be delighted to show you. Both of you. I'm working on a new piece Han hasn't seen yet."

Hannibal's anxiety had been slowly fading throughout the course of Will and Jack's conversation, but now it returns. He doesn't think Will would debut a tableau in his home –

it's beyond brazen, beyond cocky. It's simply irresponsible. It would force both their hands, would force them to handle Jack.

It's not how the Mimic operates.

"I think that would be lovely," Hannibal says, forcing himself to speak evenly. "Now, for our next course, we have a roasted pork shank."

Will smiles. "I can't wait."

"He was able to overpower both the orderly and the officer in the vehicle with him," Jack says. "And the driver, when he pulled over to see what the hell was going on. He took a uniform, police radio, two 9mm handguns, pepper spray, a Taser, and handcuffs. But it's what he didn't take that I think you'll find more interesting."

Hannibal nods for Jack to continue as he slips a bite of roasted potatoes into his mouth. Out of the corner of his eye, he watches Will, who seems moderately interested in the conversation they're having, but more focused on his food. That, he knows, is part of a veil. Will definitely has interest in Abel Gideon.

"He harvested the organs and hung them from the branches of nearby trees with veins he also took from the victims. He even tied little bows with some of them."

Will makes a startled, choking sound, and both Hannibal and Jack turn to look at him. He shakes his head dismissively, lips pressed into a thin line. "Fine, I'm fine. Ignore me."

Hannibal watches him for a moment, eyebrows furrowed, before turning back to Jack. "I suppose you don't need me to tell you that the Chesapeake Ripper never would have left the organs behind in that manner."

Jack grimaces. "That's what I'm worried about. If Gideon's not the Ripper, then he's certainly trying to get the Ripper's attention."

Hannibal hums consideringly. "He's a man in the midst of an identity crisis," he says. Both potential versions of himself are killers – it is perhaps the only constant. Until he has the Ripper in front of him, Gideon will not be able to definitively tell himself or anyone else that he is who he is."

"So he's just going to keep killing until he finds the Ripper?"

"Or until the Ripper finds him."

"Sorry," Will interrupts, his voice thin and wavering, and Hannibal's attention immediately returns to him. "Sorry, I know this is terribly rude of me, but you two obviously need to talk and I'm already going to be seeing organs tied to trees in my dreams tonight." He pushes his chair back away from the table and stands, setting his napkin to the side. "Jack, it was a pleasure to formally meet you. I'll be upstairs if you'd still like to see my pieces after you're finished. Han, dinner was amazing, as always."

He smiles, though it doesn't quite reach his eyes, and Hannibal finds himself reaching out, his fingers gently closing around Will's wrist. He doesn't hold him, doesn't try to keep him, just gently squeezes and then releases him with a nod of understanding.

After Will has disappeared up the stairs, Winston hot on his heels, Jack clears his throat. "I forget, sometimes, that not everyone is as hardened to these things as we are."

Hannibal tactfully doesn't mention the fact that Will *said* things affected him differently. Jack's attention has been diverted to Gideon, and that's where Hannibal wants to keep it – drawing it back to Will's pretense of discomfort won't be helpful. "I promise you Will has not taken offense," he replies lightly. "Do you have any leads on Gideon?"

Jack shakes his head. "We know he headed back into Baltimore after escaping, but that's it. We've got eyes on Chilton and Alana Bloom in case Gideon decides to try to make contact with them, but Freddie Lounds refused protection. She ditched the units we had tailing her after two hours."

"A risky move."

"It's a damned stupid move," Jack mutters. He leans back as Hannibal reaches for his plate to clear it, and then rises with Hannibal, following him into the kitchen. "We know Gideon's going to make a move. We just don't know when, or where, or on who."

"His movements will not be easy to predict," Hannibal says. "His mind was splintered before he became convinced he was the Ripper – now it is fractured. Logic and reasoning may have all but fled."

Jack sighs. "Great. Exactly what this city needs is another madman."

Hannibal makes a noise of disagreement. "Madmen believe themselves to be sane," he says. "Abel Gideon knows he is not sane. Though in this case, I believe that makes him more dangerous."

Scrubbing a hand over his face, Jack shakes his head. "We need a break, and I have the feeling all we're going to get is a body."

Perhaps more than one, Hannibal thinks, remembering Will's interest in Gideon.

"Gideon is unstable," Hannibal offers. "Whatever his intentions are, it is almost inevitable that they won't be sustainable. He will be his own destruction."

"Yeah," Jack agrees. "It's just a matter of who he takes down with him." Sighing, the man seems to shake himself, and Hannibal is reminded of Will and the way he stood in the doorway to Hannibal's bedroom, trying to shrug off Tobias' influence.

Jack drains the rest of his wine glass before setting it on the counter. "I know you tend to like to keep your personal life personal," he says, and Hannibal forces himself to keep washing the dishes without flinching. "But I don't think I've ever seen you so... *open* with someone

before.” He laughs quietly, almost to himself, and then shakes his head as Hannibal’s fingers flex and curl around a knife. “It’s good. I’m glad you’re happy.”

Hannibal releases the knife, setting it aside on the drying rack. “I will be the first to admit I was not looking for... any of what Will has brought into my life,” he says. “But, ah... ‘Love seized me so strongly through his charm that, as you can see, it has not yet abandoned me.’”

That, he supposes, is as good of a way as any to describe what Will is to him.

Jack looks up, expression quizzical. “I know you’re quoting something at me, Doctor Lecter.”

“Dante,” Hannibal replies, almost absently. “It appears even I am not immune to the dramatics of romance.”

Jack laughs. “I haven’t met a man yet who is,” he says. “Congratulations, you’re just like the rest of us.”

Hannibal smiles tightly, though if Jack notices the fraying at the edges of his expression, he doesn’t call attention to it. “Might I interest you in a nightcap, Jack?”

He only offers because, as a rule, Jack turns him down. He stays true to form this time as well, shaking his head and declining politely. “Though if the offer still stands to see Will’s artwork, I’d gladly see that before I head home.”

Hannibal has half a mind to send Jack home, regardless of the offer’s status, but he has the sneaking suspicion that course of action wouldn’t go over well with Will. He reminds himself that the likelihood of there being a body waiting for Jack is slim, and he smiles, gesturing towards the stairs. “He wouldn’t have offered if it wasn’t genuine. Please, this way.”

He leads Jack up the stairs, pausing in front of the door to Will’s bedroom. He raps his knuckles on the wood once, twice, and on the other side he hears nails clicking against the floor as Winston stirs and stretches, and then the heavier sound of Will’s footsteps.

The door opens, and Will appears on the other side. Immediately, Hannibal is hit with a familiar scent, one that makes the tension bleed out of his shoulders as relief floods his veins.

Turpentine and linseed oil.

Will smiles at the sight of them, stepping slightly to the side to allow them to pass through the doorway. “Come on in,” he says. “It’s a little cold in here, but I have to have the window open for ventilation.”

Hannibal gestures for Jack to follow Will inside, and he follows Jack. He immediately notices that the furniture in the room has been moved, most of it pushed to one side to create space by the window, and that’s where Will has set up an easel. The canvas is facing away from the door, so Hannibal doesn’t see the scene depicted on it at first, but as he moves farther into the room the change in angle slowly reveals the image to him, and his breath catches in his throat.

The oil painting isn't finished. The figures in the foreground are only sketched out, ghosts and shadows of what they'll be when Will is finished, but the shape of them is still there. Hannibal can see the distinctive outline of the instrument, the fine brush strokes that have brought the background to stunning, vibrant life, and he has to force himself to breathe, to control the fine trembling of his hands.

"I'm not finished, obviously," Will says, with a small, self-deprecating laugh. "I haven't had the chance to do very many of de Lairese's works, so I'm not very familiar with his style. It's slow going. But I'm enjoying the challenge."

Jack makes a soft, impressed noise. "I don't think I've seen this one before," he says. "What's it called?"

Will's eyes flick over to Hannibal as Jack's stay firmly fixed on the painting. "*Achilles Playing the Lyre Before Patroclus*," he says, and Hannibal feels the hairs on the back of his neck stand up at the dark glint in Will's gaze. "The piece itself isn't very well known, but the client is a fan of *The Iliad*."

Hannibal is unable to contain the shiver that rips through him as a half-dozen thought processes all collide at once. *I haven't read The Iliad since high school*, he remembers, and *you know the quality of art you'll be getting in return*, and *I fed Jack a story about the killer striking again if he wasn't successful so that I could put my hands on the instrument you left for me and pull a sound from her myself*. And a lyre isn't a harp, not quite, but Hannibal thinks that a little artistic license can be forgiven.

Oh, Will.

"This is beautiful, Will," Jack says, and then he turns to look at Hannibal. "Be careful, Doctor Lecter. This one could give you a run for your money."

And Hannibal laughs, hoping he doesn't sound quite as raw as he feels. "Oh, believe me, Jack. I'm well aware."

Jack leaves not long after, with another warning to keep an eye out for Gideon. Hannibal promises to be careful, but as soon as the door closes behind Jack, Abel Gideon all but fades from his mind. He turns to Will, who is waiting behind him with his hands in his pockets and a small, knowing smile on his face.

"The paintings," Hannibal begins, and his voice, to his horror, is far rougher than it has any right to be. Will's expression softens, and he reaches out, taking one of Hannibal's hands in his own to draw him in close, letting Hannibal cage him in against the wall behind him.

"Whenever he's mentioned in *The Iliad*, Patroclus seems to be defined by his empathy," Will says, the words murmured against Hannibal's shoulder. "He *became* Achilles on the field of war."

Hannibal takes a deep breath, his nose filled with Will's scent, mixed with the aroma of their meal, the earthy notes of Winston's fur, and the sharper notes of pine and oil. "Hiding and

revealing identity is a constant theme throughout the Greek epics,” he replies. “Your career of choice is very on the nose.”

Will laughs softly, and his arms slide around Hannibal’s waist, a firm, warm weight. “It seemed fitting,” he says. “No less on the nose than a culinary cannibal, at any rate.”

Hannibal sighs, though he feels a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “It seems I am having undue influence on you.”

Will leans back just far enough to meet Hannibal’s eyes, one eyebrow raised questioningly. “And I haven’t had undue influence on you?”

Instinctively, Hannibal almost answers *no*, and then he thinks about Winston, about Will in his kitchen, about waxing poetic about *love* to Jack Crawford, of all people, and he rethinks his answer. “I quoted Dante to Jack,” he confesses. “So, yes, I believe you have had an influence on me.”

Will’s eyes light up. “You have to give me more than that, Hannibal. What did you say?”

Leaning forward, Hannibal sets his mouth against the soft skin behind Will’s ear, reveling in the soft shiver he immediately gets in return. When he speaks, his voice is quiet, though he’s so close he knows Will can hear him perfectly fine. ““Love seized me so strongly through his charm that, as you can see, it has not yet abandoned me.””

Will sucks in a sharp breath, the pads of his fingers digging sharply into the small of Hannibal’s back for a moment before smoothing out, soft and soothing. “*Jesus*,” he mutters, and then one of his hands is in Hannibal’s hair, yanking his head back so that Will can kiss him, hard and rough and demanding.

When they part a few moments later, both of them panting softly, Will’s eyes are dark, his smile sharp and feral around red, swollen lips.

“I think it’s high time I met Abel Gideon. I owe you another tableau.”

Chapter End Notes

I’ve had that dinnertime Will-reveals-his-past-scene sketched out since the beginning, so I’m very excited to finally get to it. smitten-yet-worried!Hannibal is my favorite.

also, HAN. Jack’s worldview has been irrevocably altered by that single word falling from Will’s lips.

coming up next: more of Will’s POV and another tableau. and a little bit later: the sappiest romantic cannibal bullshit you ever did see. you have been warned.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

“Let’s give you something better to do with your tongue than wag it, shall we?” Will asks, and Carruthers can’t scream, but *oh* does he want to.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When it comes down to it, it’s easy to find Abel Gideon, because the man *wants* to be found.

That’s not to say he wants to be *caught*. Gideon, Will knows, has no desire to return to custody. He’ll do everything he can to avoid it. But at the same time, he’s trying to draw attention to himself, trying to catch the Ripper’s eye so that, ostensibly, the two of them can sit down and have a little chat.

Will has no intention of letting Gideon get anywhere near Hannibal. He learned that lesson with Budge, and he learned it well – the difference with Gideon, of course, is that he doesn’t know *who* the Ripper really is.

Will can let himself slip, and Gideon won’t know the difference.

Will collects his car from long-term parking the morning after Jack joins them for dinner (hitchhiking is a good way to hunt, but not an efficient method of travel). And then, because he’s had the chance to talk to Hannibal and listen to Jack Crawford, he parks himself outside the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane and waits.

Frederick Chilton’s car is in the parking lot, and judging from the cruiser parked outside the hospital, Will makes the educated guess that Chilton himself is inside. He’s making the assumption, of course, that Jack is on the right track in judging that Gideon will go after those he deems responsible for his identity crisis – but he thinks that’s a reasonable assumption to make. Gideon will need victims if he wants to attract the Ripper’s attention, and the Ripper kills the *rude*.

No one has been quite as rude to Abel Gideon as Frederick Chilton has.

Will is rewarded for his patience in the late afternoon. As the sun begins to set, a stocky, hunched figure approaches the parked cruisers. He bends down in front of the window of one, and Will is too far away to hear words or even see mouths moving, but it doesn’t matter. The conversation doesn’t last long.

One of the uniforms inside the cruiser rolls down the window, and the figure outside fires two shots into the car. The gun is silenced – across the parking lot, Will doesn’t hear a thing. He

just sees the spray of blood across the other window and the faint motion of two bodies slumping in the sudden limpness of death.

Gideon turns and makes a beeline for Chilton's car. As Will watches, he produces a jemmy bar from inside of his jacket and forces the lock on one of the doors open before clambering into the backseat. He shuts the door and then ducks down, and Will loses sight of him.

Five minutes later, Chilton emerges from the hospital. He doesn't even glance in the cruiser's direction; Will wonders idly if it's annoyance or arrogance that makes him so dismissive of his protective detail, because whichever it is, it's about to cost him dearly.

Will watches as Chilton gets into his car, watches as Gideon makes himself known by pressing the muzzle of the gun to the back of Chilton's head. Thirty seconds later, Chilton starts the car and pulls out of the parking lot.

Will follows at a safe distance, and when he realizes where they're going, it's impossible to stop the smile from spreading across his face.

By the time Will makes it to the observatory, the sun has set, and, from his calculations, Gideon has had about thirty minutes to begin whatever process he's going to inflict upon Chilton. Still, he's careful. He turns off his headlights and parks his car slowly, and when he approaches the building, he does it from the back. The door he finds is locked, but the observatory was not designed with top-tier security measures in mind – Will is able to pick the lock and let himself inside with a fair amount of ease.

The sight he finds inside takes his breath away.

Gideon has turned the observatory into a surgical suite, and he has filled his stage with all the proper roles. He is the surgeon, dressed in scrubs; Freddie Lounds, Will assumes, is his assistant, clutching white-knuckled at a resuscitation bag; and Frederick Chilton, lying dazed and disoriented on the operating table, is the patient.

"With experience, I have found surgeries are best performed on a local anesthetic or epidural with the patient awake. Reminds me there's a real person here entrusting me with their life, rather than a lump of meat that I'm about to reorganize."

Gideon's voice is even, conversational. He's comfortable, in his element, once more a surgeon after so long being incarcerated. Will can almost feel his pleasure, his satisfaction. *Almost.*

Gideon looks down at Chilton. "And in this instance," he says, leaning down a little, "I would like to see the look on your face."

Chilton says something in reply that Will can't hear, but Gideon seems to take it in stride. "You got inside my mind, Frederick," he says. "It's only fair I get inside your belly."

As Gideon introduces Chilton and Lounds to each other, Will slips, just a little, his fingers twitching with the need to reach out and rearrange, to alter the man on the operating table

irrevocably, just as he so cavalierly altered Gideon. It's a bizarre desire, and he's not so far gone that he doesn't recognize that. Still, he understands. *An eye for an eye*. It might make the whole world blind, but the process would still be awfully satisfying.

"The real Chesapeake Ripper," Gideon continues, "is a collector of surgical trophies. I'm gonna leave him a little gift. In fact, I'm gonna leave him a gift basket."

As Freddie Lounds looks on in horror, and Gideon begins to cut, Will retreats back to the door.

Will leaves the building, but he doesn't *leave*.

He waits in the cold for nearly two hours, gloved hands shoved in his pockets, while Gideon finishes performing surgery, but he hardly feels it. He's not quite *lost* in the maze of Gideon's mind – his slide is careful, controlled – but for all that he's cautiously testing the waters, he's still fascinated.

Will has encountered more than his fair share of *dark*, of *crazy*, of minds so beautifully broken the fact they still functioned at all was nothing short of a miracle. Watching Gideon work on Chilton was enough, at least in regards to understanding the headspace the man is in. His mind is a patchwork, and he's in the process of unraveling it all and picking out the pieces that originally belonged to him, but he's nowhere near done. He's barely even begun.

Will thinks, almost absently, that it's a shame he won't get the chance to finish.

By the time Gideon finally emerges, the world has gone completely dark. The only light outside the observatory is the moon, full and bright in the sky above, though the light it does cast is eerie and cold. It makes it easy to see Gideon when he comes through the door, clad once again in street clothes – and it makes it easy for Gideon to see Will.

Gideon looks at him, and then looks around him, as if he's expecting the FBI to suddenly jump out of the woods surrounding them. Will doesn't move. He doesn't speak, either. He just waits, patiently, until the startled expression starts to fade from Gideon's expression.

"Are you the man who claimed to be the Chesapeake Ripper?" Will asks then, and his voice breaks the silence between them.

Gideon doesn't startle, but he raises one eyebrow immediately, his expression going from wary to interested in half a breath. "Why do you say 'claimed?'" he asks slowly. There's still a good amount of uncertainty in his voice, and Will doesn't blame him. Gideon is likely cycling through possible identities for Will in his head, and Will can't imagine any of them bring much comfort to him.

Will sighs, relaxing his posture. "Because you're not," he says, and his voice drags a little as he *slips* a little farther. Identities muddle behind his eyes: Will Graham, the Mimic, Abel Gideon, the Ripper, and *Gideon's* version of the Ripper all mixing and settling, spreading like a veil. "You know you're not, even if you don't know much more about who you are beyond that."

“Are *you* the Ripper?”

And isn't that a question? Will could probably even say it with more certainty than Gideon, but instead he chuckles under his breath and shakes his head. “I'd say I currently resemble you more than I resemble him.”

Gideon blinks, and the other eyebrow goes up. “Currently?”

“Personality can be a sliding scale,” Will says dryly, “as I'm sure you're well aware.”

With a sharp, short sound that Will realizes is supposed to be a laugh, Gideon shakes his head. “I'm afraid I'm quite beyond ‘sliding ‘at this point.”

Oh, Will thinks, though the sudden recognition feels more like pity than anything else. “You don't know how to gauge who you are anymore.” Gideon's head jerks up, blue eyes meeting blue eyes across an expanse of cold air. “You don't feel like yourself,” Will continues, and he lets his voice go soft. “You feel like you have been gradually becoming different for a while, and now you just feel like somebody else. You feel... crazy.” Will pauses, cocking his head. “What kind of crazy are you, Doctor Gideon?”

Gideon lets out a shaky breath, and it clouds the air in front of him in little puffs that slowly rise and dissipate. “I'm not quite sure,” he replies. He swallows, and when he speaks again, his voice is steadier. “Though I'm rather interested in whatever kind of crazy *you* are.”

The corners of Will's mouth twitch up, and he laughs, a soft, short sound. “You wouldn't be the only one.”

Gideon nods, looking at him appraisingly. “It's like remembering something from your childhood,” he says after a moment, “and you're not sure if it's your memory or a friend's memory, and then you realize, sadly, it's just some photo in an old book.”

Will, both the part of him that's *him* and the part of him that's Gideon, understands that. “You fear not knowing who you are.”

Gideon grimaces at the words, but Will doesn't stop. “You're like a blind man. Somebody got inside your head and moved all the furniture around, and now you're stumbling over the pieces of yourself that are familiar, but not quite where you remember leaving them.”

“I'm sorry,” Gideon says abruptly, straightening his shoulders, “but have we met before? Perhaps during my unfortunate incarceration? You'll forgive me if I don't recall. All the moving furniture and all that.”

Will shakes his head. “I'm not a psychiatrist, but I know about you.” He pauses, smiling crookedly. “Maybe I even know more about you than you do, right now. You aren't the Chesapeake Ripper, although Chilton convinced you, under his therapy, that you were. And now you're going to do everything in your power to get the real Ripper's attention. If that's what you really want, I think I can help you get it.”

Gideon's gaze goes suddenly wary again. “And why would you want to help me?”

Will's smile goes thin, plastic, see-through. "You feel like you're losing your mind," he says. "Like you don't know what's real. I know what that's like."

"Empathizing with a murderer? How novel."

"It's a terrible thing, to have your identity taken from you. Empathy comes easily in situations like this."

Gideon bristles. "Well, I'm taking my identity back, one piece at a time." He pauses, flashing teeth in an expression that's equal parts a snarl and a smile. "You should see the pieces I got out of my psychiatrist."

"A gift basket of Chilton's organs." Will doesn't bother trying to hide the admiration in his voice. "Curated specifically for the Ripper." He pauses, considering. "Alana Bloom was one of your psychiatrists, too. Isn't that right?"

Gideon's voice, when he speaks again, is almost a purr.

"Ah yes, Doctor Bloom."

Will smiles easily. "I can tell you where to find her."

"And in exchange?"

"I give you a place, you give me a name," Will replies, shrugging. "Does that seem like a fair trade?"

Gideon eyes him. Eventually, his desire to meet the Ripper, to exact his revenge, outweighs his uncertainty. "What kind of name?"

When Will speaks, the words taste victorious on his tongue.

"Surely Chilton had some assistance when he rearranged you from the inside out?"

After Gideon leaves, Will debates on going back into the observatory for all of ten seconds before making his decision, his curiosity to see what Gideon left for the Ripper overwhelming all other urges.

He slips back inside quietly, though when he sees Freddie Lounds still standing over Chilton, faithfully squeezing away at the resuscitation bag, he pauses, catching the door before it can swing shut behind him. *Interesting*, he thinks, *to make Freddie Lounds part of the gift basket*. Not unexpected, just... interesting.

Will quickly ducks outside, returning to his car. From the glove box he retrieves one of a handful of burner cells, carefully wiping it down with the hem of his shirt before pocketing it. Then he reaches under the front seat, feeling for the 9mm that's strapped to the underside.

He has no intention of shooting Freddie Lounds or Frederick Chilton, but he hasn't survived as long as he has by being unprepared

He's all but silent as he slips back into the observatory, slowly closing the door behind him so it makes nothing more than a whisper of a sound. Freddie's breathing is louder than any of the noises he makes, controlled if a little uneven in her worry and horror. It provides a decent cover as he stalks towards her, stopping about six or seven feet behind her.

He raises the gun and cocks it, the sound echoing in the quiet room around them.

"Don't turn around, Miss Lounds."

Freddie startles, *hard*, and nearly drops the resuscitation bag. As she catches herself and pointedly doesn't turn around, Will can't stop the soft chuckle that spills from his lips. "My apologies," he murmurs, not bothering to hide the amusement in his voice. "I know shock does terrible things to the body. But I need to know you're understanding me."

Freddie nods, causing her curls to wobble. "I understand," she says, and despite her very obvious fear, she makes every effort to keep her voice steady. Will finds it admirable, in a vague, distracted sort of way.

"Good girl." Will takes a few slow steps closer, watching her. He doesn't think she'll do anything terribly stupid, not with an unknown presence at her back and a man's life in her hands, but fear makes people act in unreliable ways, and he'd rather leave Freddie and Chilton alive for the FBI to find. Gideon didn't have the time or the skillset to do to Chilton exactly what the man did to him, but he did his own rearranging all the same. Allowing Chilton to die would let all that lovely knife work go to waste.

When he's certain Freddie isn't going to try to pull anything heroic, he takes the burner phone out of his pocket. With one gloved hand, he reaches out and lays it carefully in the nest of organs gathered in the open mess of Chilton's abdomen. As soon as she sees the phone, Freddie makes a soft sound, something between surprise and dismay.

"As soon as I leave," Will says gently, "you should call the authorities. For both your sake and Doctor Chilton's."

Freddie lets out a shaky breath as Will settles directly behind her. He can smell her shampoo, and under it, the acrid scent of her sweat, her fear. "Who are you?" she asks, and if it hadn't come out as barely more than a whisper, it might even have been aggressive.

Will smiles, even if she can't see him. "I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you."

"You're doing a good thing, here. Don't you want recognition?"

Will thinks of early mornings and late nights, of rolling over in bed, half-asleep, and seeing Hannibal awake, his face illuminated by the glow of his phone or his tablet as he scrolled through Tattle-Crime, and part of him thinks *yes* while another part thinks *no*.

And he feels for Gideon, he really does – Will learned a long time ago to embrace the chaos, to lean into feeling like *someone else*. He was young enough that the lesson took easily, and now conflicting urges like the ones he's experiencing now don't send him spiraling.

Gideon is not so lucky.

The Ripper wants the recognition. The Mimic does not. When it comes down to making a decision, though, it's easy: Will is not in the observatory as the Mimic. And while he's not there as the Ripper either, necessarily, that sliding scale of personality has him far closer to one than the other.

"I'm sure you'll provide plenty of recognition," he murmurs, "even without my name."

For a moment, there's silence. And then Freddie's voice, soft with uncertainty, breaks it. "I... I don't understand."

Will huffs a soft laugh. "Come now, Miss Lounds. You're usually so eager to jump to conclusions. But I suppose that, under the circumstances, you can be forgiven needing a hint or two." Will pauses, and then leans in, dragging the muzzle of the gun down over the flounces of Freddie's red curls. She flinches, hard, and then steadies herself with a fortitude that's impressive, forcing herself to continue squeezing the resuscitation bag with regular, if shaky, movements. "Doctor Gideon was seeking someone's attention, was he not?"

He can see the moment the realization hits her, *jolts* through her, a shiver that passes through her entire body.

"You're the Chesapeake Ripper."

Will hums softly. "Not quite as impressive an intuitive leap now that I've led you there, I must admit."

"What do you want from me?"

Her voice is close to breaking, now. Will suddenly aches to press, to push, to tip her over that edge. He wants to dash her to a million pieces, to watch her shatter; he understands, perhaps, Chilton's motivation in driving Gideon to the brink of insanity. It's a tantalizing prospect, the idea of holding so much power over someone else that their mind simply *breaks* under the weight of it.

He can taste her broken pieces on his tongue, and he allows himself to savor the thought for all of a moment before he pushes it away. Regretfully, it's not the time or the place for him to break Freddie Lounds.

"I think you misunderstand, Miss Lounds." He reaches up, stroking a gloved hand over the back of her head. When she tries to jerk away from his touch, he laughs softly. "I don't want anything from you. If I did, I would take it, and we would not be having this conversation. I am simply offering you the opportunity to save a life." He pauses, considering, and *oh*. It's nice when things come together. "Two, if you so desire."

"Two?"

"Do you think Doctor Gideon will stop at a single gift basket? I believe he has his sights set on Alana Bloom. She may appreciate the forewarning."

Freddie sucks in a breath. “Why are you telling me this?”

Will drops the gun to his side and takes a few steps back. “Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery that mediocrity can pay to greatness,” he says, the words are familiar on his tongue, sweet like coffee in the early hours of the morning. “Yet I find neither Gideon’s imitation nor his mediocrity flattering.”

“But you consider yourself great?”

Will chuckles softly. “It’s getting late. I would call an ambulance, Miss Lounds, before your patient becomes so many pounds of offal and nothing more.”

He doesn’t linger to watch Freddie scoop the phone out of Chilton’s innards and dial 911 with shaking fingers. He has more important things to do, places to go, people to see.

He may already have the real Ripper’s attention, but he’s still going to work to keep it.

Will does not return home that night. While Abel Gideon’s psyche is nowhere as clingy as Tobias Budge’s was, Will still has no desire to let any of the Ripper’s fan club near Hannibal, even by proxy. And, in any case, he hasn’t completed his tableau.

He will not return to Hannibal empty-handed.

The next morning, Will tracks down the name Gideon gave him. A man who focuses primarily on research and publications, Doctor Paul Carruthers ends up not being a difficult man to subdue.

(Psychiatrists so very rarely are).

The image of the tableau comes to him as he’s considering what exactly it is Carruthers is guilty of. Because while he may not have actively been moving furniture with Chilton, he certainly did more than his fair share of discussing Gideon in his articles, dissecting the man’s mind on paper instead of in therapy.

Carruthers blinks up at Will, glassy-eyed and frightened, and Will smiles.

“Let’s give you something better to do with your tongue than wag it, shall we?” he asks, and Carruthers can’t scream, but *oh* does he want to. The terror in his eyes is almost palpable.

It’s not the first Columbian necktie Will has ever completed. It is, however, the least *bloody* one he’s ever done.

He packs all of Carruthers’ blood on ice and chuckles to himself as he scribbles a note on Carruthers’ prescription pad. Gideon’s brand of crazy, whatever it is, is slowly coming apart at the seams, and it’s making Will feel giddy, *reckless*. He has to force *Gideon* to take a step back and make himself come forward for a moment to purge the endorphins from his system.

Then Will looks at the needle, looks at the blood bags sitting in the cooler, looks at his own forearms bared by his rolled-up sleeves, and remembers his promise not to leave Hannibal’s

pantry empty. He remembers Hannibal's voice curling around the words *love seized me*, and the way the older man's eyes linger as Will eats the food he makes, and suddenly pushing Gideon to the back of his mind becomes irrelevant, though this time the excitement he feels is all his own.

Because, well, isn't that a thought?

The day after Will leaves in search of Abel Gideon, Jack calls Hannibal to a scene.

It feels like it's too soon to be entirely safe. Hannibal can't imagine that it's Will's, not yet, but he goes anyway – the house feels oddly empty with Will gone, and Hannibal recognizes the address Jack gave him. Even if it's not Will's scene, it relates to Gideon.

Hannibal is greeted by Jack's grim visage as soon as he arrives outside Dr. Paul Carruthers' office, and it's pulling so tightly at the lines of his face that it makes Hannibal pause and take the man in more fully. "What happened?" he asks after a moment, because whatever sight awaits them upstairs, it can't be the sole reason for Jack's unease.

"Inside," Jack says under his breath, turning to all but usher Hannibal towards the door. He doesn't say anything else until it closes behind them, but when he does speak again, Hannibal's interest is immediately piqued. "Gideon is on a spree."

"I'm not surprised," Hannibal says mildly. "I'm sure he's aware his current status cannot be maintained. Is this not the only body you've found?"

Jack shakes his head. "It wasn't a body. Last night we found Freddie Lounds and Frederick Chilton out in the old observatory. Gideon had... *performed surgery* on Chilton and left him holding his own organs."

Hannibal pauses, taking a moment to imagine the scene. "And Miss Lounds? What was she doing there?"

"Keeping Chilton alive with a manual respirator." Jack sighs, scrubbing a hand over his face. "That's not all, though. She's the reason we found them. She was able to call 911 after Gideon left."

"That's fortunate."

"Fortunate isn't the word. Apparently, the Chesapeake Ripper dropped off a burner cell."

Hannibal blinks. *I most certainly did not*, he thinks, instinctively bristling before he remembers who, exactly, was out last night in search of Abel Gideon. "Perhaps not, then," he manages to say. "She saw the Ripper?"

Jack laughs humorlessly, shaking his head. "No. She heard him, but she didn't get a chance to look at him. He told her he's pissed at Gideon, and that Gideon's likely going to target Doctor Bloom next." At Hannibal's questioning expression, Jack waves a hand. "I'm paraphrasing.

I'll have a copy of Lounds' statement sent over to you when it's ready. Maybe you can pick up something about this guy from the way he talked to her."

What are you doing, Will? Hannibal thinks. Aloud, he says, "Of course. Any way I can help. Now, you said Doctor Bloom was Gideon's next target. She's not..." He lets his words trail off diplomatically, gesturing vaguely at the stairs that lead up to Carruthers' office.

"Oh, no," Jack says. "Alana Bloom is under protective custody. *Increased* protective custody, now that there's been a tangible threat. If he does go after her, we'll be ready."

Hannibal nods. "Then I assume the victim is indeed Doctor Carruthers?"

Jack sighs, and leads Hannibal up to the office.

"As I'm sure you know, Doctor Paul Carruthers wrote an article for the *Journal of Criminal Psychology*, in which he described Doctor Gideon as being a pathological narcissist who suffers from psychotic episodes."

Jack opens the door, and Hannibal takes in the scene inside.

The doctor is sprawled out in his office chair, his head tipped back against the headrest to bare his neck. The length of his throat has been slit like a second mouth, and through it lolls the man's tongue, wet and limp, hanging over the collar of his shirt like a cravat.

"Well," Hannibal says lightly, "let us hope he got some satisfaction from being proven right."

Jack sighs again, glancing back at the body. "I think this is about more than just getting the Chesapeake Ripper's attention."

Hannibal hums softly. That's too obvious to miss, even for a man so willingly blinded by everything related to the Ripper as Jack is. "Gideon's mind was dissected by psychiatrists," he says. "It appears he is doing his own dissections in return."

"No, that's not how he died," Zeller interrupts. "Drained him till his heart stopped."

"Got a little on his collar," Beverly chimes in. "Other than that, didn't spill a drop."

Price rises from where he's kneeling next to a cooler. "That's because it's all in here. Four-and-a-half liters all packed in ice. There's a note, too. 'Please deliver to the Red Cross.'"

Beverly huffs a breath of laughter. "That's considerate."

Jack, pointedly, does not laugh. "He's peacocking for the Ripper."

"Similar to the gifting of flowers and chocolate before a first date," Hannibal says, biting back a smile.

"I don't understand." Jack's frustration makes his voice harsh. "The Ripper was at the observatory *minutes* after Gideon was, according to Lounds. Why is this necessary?"

“I don’t think serial killers can exactly use the Missed Connections section of Craigslist,” Beverly remarks dryly. “If Gideon wants another shot at the Ripper, he’s going to have to make it happen. And that means making it worth the Ripper’s while.”

“Was anything taken?” Hannibal asks, carefully pitching his voice to be idly curious and nothing more. “Other than the blood, I mean.”

“We won’t know for sure until we get the body back to the lab,” Zeller replies. “But it doesn’t look like it. Even all the blood’s still here. He just... got in there and moved stuff around, put it back where it didn’t belong. It’s weird.”

“It’s always weird when the Ripper’s involved,” Beverly says, sighing. “And I am so *tired* of weird.”

Chapter End Notes

what I want to know is how the HELL Gideon managed to kidnap Chilton in canon. it makes no sense to me. (what does make sense, hopefully, is why I stole this kill for Will. it will all come together next chapter, promise!)

also, Freddie wasn’t even really supposed to be in this chapter except as a cameo, but I couldn’t resist writing a little more of Will in that creepy mixed Will/Gideon/“faux Ripper” headspace he fell into, so she got to suffer. and now I have plans for a little more of her suffering in a later chapter, because she’s heard Will’s voice – Hannibal and Will can’t just let her keep running around indefinitely with that knowledge, now can they?

(a million thank yous for your lovely comments btw – I go back and read through them when the interns at my job seem intent on testing my ‘eat the rude’ policy, and they calm me tf down and remind me that I’m writing fanfiction on company time, so life isn’t all bad ;))

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Hannibal opens the refrigerator, and his eyes are immediately drawn to the gift Will left.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hannibal returns home to a house flooded with light and the metallic scent of blood, and Will waiting for him in his kitchen.

It's mostly Will, at least. The man leaning up against the counter, clad in jeans and a dark Henley, has Will's easy posture and Abel Gideon's glittering eyes. Hannibal spots them as soon as he sees Will, and his steps falter, the memory of how Tobias' influence had overlaid Will's making Hannibal momentarily wary.

"Chilton really did a number on him," Will says, his voice loose and soft. "I almost feel bad for dear Doctor Gideon. He really thought he was the Ripper, at least for a little while."

Hannibal stills. "You found him?"

The look Will gives him is nothing short of unimpressed. "Was my tableau lacking in some way?"

My tableau. There's a small part of Hannibal that isn't surprised, not really, but the majority of him is. The Mimic is cautious. Methodical. Will took four days to put together his last tableau, and while it was, perhaps, a good deal more complex, he also allowed himself more time to plan, to *prepare*. The Carruthers kill was not impulsive, but it was not careful either, a necessary sort of recklessness on display that at the time seemed very in line with Gideon's character.

He remains silent for a moment too long, and Will notices, blue eyes going wide. "You didn't know," he murmurs, his voice thick with wonder. "You really thought it was Gideon."

Hannibal thinks of the precision of the cuts, thinks about the blood left in the cooler, thinks about the *note*, and swallows against the uncomfortable feeling of being wrong, all-too aware of Will's eyes lingering on him. "Gideon has an entire team of FBI agents searching for him," he says, instead. "I assumed you would still be searching him out as well."

"I told you I was an excellent hunter, Doctor Lecter. I'm almost offended you didn't believe me." Will grins lazily, belying the lack of offense he's feeling. "Gideon wanted Chilton, and I wanted Gideon. It wasn't a complex chain of events to set into motion. It was enlightening to

see his handiwork firsthand, though.” He pauses. “All these killers wanting your attention. I suppose I should be flattered I’m the one who has it.”

“You’re the one who’s earned it,” Hannibal replies, and Will *giggles*, tossing his head back. The motion bares the length of his neck, and Hannibal’s eyes are drawn to it almost involuntarily, the long, vulnerable stretch of it exposed in the bright light of the kitchen. It’s only for a moment, and then Will’s looking at him again, his eyes still shining just a little too much.

“I learned from Tobias Budge,” he says, *slips*, his voice losing a little of its giddy lilt. The abrupt change in topic forces Hannibal to draw his attention away from Will’s neck. “Gideon won’t survive long enough to meet the Ripper. I sent him after that other doctor you mentioned, Bloom. And I had Freddie Lounds call her to warn her. The FBI will be waiting for him there en force, but there’s not a chance he’ll allow himself to be taken back into custody, not after what was done to him under Chilton’s care.”

“And Lounds?”

Will looks like he’s struggling not to roll his eyes. “Freddie Lounds heard my voice while panic-altered and exhausted. She’ll write an article about surviving an encounter with the Ripper, and that will be the end of it.”

Hannibal raises an eyebrow. “The Ripper?”

Will loses his struggle, rolling his eyes with a sigh. “Perceptions, responsibility, *not mine*,” he says, waving a hand. “Though it was advantageous at the time not to correct her. Your reputation is a lot scarier than mine.”

“Yours as the Mimic, or yours as Abel Gideon?”

Will laughs again, though this time the sound is a little less unhinged. “Either. Both. Gideon’s head is an interesting place to be. It’s like someone badly erased a sentence and then rewrote over it. It’s clear what’s real, but it’s also clear that something else used to be just as real. Me and him and his version of you and *my* version of you all fit together in such fascinating ways.”

Will shakes his head, still smiling. “Freddie Lounds might become a problem,” he says, and just like that, the last traces of Gideon fade away. He’s himself once again, the brightness behind his eyes familiar not from interviews and sessions, but from late-night conversations and shared breakfasts. Suddenly the space between them no longer seems necessary. Will looks at *home*, comfortable, and something in Hannibal’s chest settles at the realization.

Will’s words, though, have him wary. “Jack said she didn’t see you.”

“She didn’t, but we had ourselves a nice little chat.” Will’s teeth flash, appearing to worry at his bottom lip for a moment. Gideon’s guarded mania has disappeared, but it’s been replaced with Will’s own energy, a coiled kind of excitement that Hannibal can only see the edges of. “It’s unlikely I’ll cross paths with her again, but if I did, she’d probably be able to identify me.”

Hannibal frowns. That is problematic, though not as bad as it could be. Freddie Lounds and Will Graham do not naturally have the same social circles, and even with their shared point of Hannibal, it's unlikely they'll encounter each other outside of Will hunting her down. The longer she's allowed to roam freely, however, the more the risk increases.

"You want to kill her."

Will's eyes flash, and his tongue darts out, wetting his bottom lip. "Freddie Lounds won't be my kill," he says, his tone deliberate as his gaze meets Hannibal's. "I wouldn't take that pleasure away from you."

Darling Will, Hannibal thinks. *Darling, perfect Will*.

"You want *me* to kill her."

Will grins. "Eventually," he says. "For now, let her squirm. And keep writing about you, of course."

Hannibal nods, and he finally takes the last few steps forward into the kitchen. "Of course," he says, and Will's eyes follow him as he goes to the sink to wash his hands. It's past time for lunch, but he doubts Will has eaten – and the younger man is thin enough as it is without skipping meals.

"Hannibal," Will says as he's drying his hands, and his voice is tight, tremulous. Hannibal looks up sharply at the sound, but all he finds are Will's eyes, bright with anticipation, staring at him. Will has his hands in his pockets, and his posture is casual, but Hannibal can see the lines of his body, the tension hidden in them, and it doesn't make sense until Will speaks again.

"I got you something." Will's eyes flick to the space behind Hannibal. "Check the fridge."

Interest piqued, Hannibal turns. The report hasn't come in from Carruthers' autopsy yet, though Hannibal hadn't seen any signs of organ harvesting. But Will is far too *wound* to have brought Hannibal something like fish again. This is new. This is pushing a line Will hasn't even toed before.

Hannibal opens the refrigerator, and his eyes are immediately drawn to the gift Will left.

Laying flat on the middle shelf is a blood bag, full and sealed.

There had been four-and-a-half liters of blood in Carruthers' office. As far as averages go, Hannibal thinks, that is on the lower end of the spectrum. Assuming Will had been able to drain Carruthers completely dry, there could be anywhere between a half to a full liter missing from the neatly packaged Red Cross donation.

Closing the door, Hannibal turns to face Will, the question already poised on the tip of his tongue. It fades, though, when he sees the man. While Hannibal's back was turned, Will rolled up one of his sleeves, revealing a cotton ball pressed into the crook of his arm, held in

place with a band of green cohesive bandage. As Hannibal watches, Will tugs the bandage off, checking the back of the cotton ball before crumpling both into his palm.

And the realization hits Hannibal like a physical blow: the blood is Will's.

The blood is Will's.

Will looks up and catches him staring. One corner of his mouth twitches up, the smallest hint of a smile. "You look surprised."

Hannibal swallows. He doesn't feel *surprised*. He feels unmoored, unbalanced, and something of that must show on his face, must bleed across into the part of him tucked away in Will's mind, because the hint of amusement immediately fades from Will's expression. A moment later he's circled around the counter and is in Hannibal's space, reaching up to gently cup the older man's jaw with one palm.

"Hey," Will murmurs, low and soft, his eyes searching Hannibal's face. "Hey, *ma moitié*, talk to me. You look like I gutted you."

Hannibal shivers, leaning into Will's hand as his own arms slide around Will's waist of their own accord. That's how he feels – gutted – and the way the endearment slips so easily from Will's lips isn't helping with that particular sentiment. *Ma moitié*. This one isn't a tease, isn't a show put on for Jack Crawford. No, this is just Will, in earnest, calling Hannibal his *better half* because he thinks it will be comforting, assuring.

"I expected a trophy from Doctor Carruthers."

Hannibal's voice is little more than a rasp, thick in his own throat. His fingers curl in the fabric of Will's Henley, and Will just presses himself closer as his thumb strokes ever so gently over the swell of the Hannibal's cheekbone.

"It felt... wrong," Will says, slowly. He's searching for the words, trying to put what he's feeling into a form that Hannibal will understand. "Not the trophy part in and of itself. But, I guess, bringing you home a part of someone else before I'd offered up a piece of me."

Hannibal trembles, a bodily thing he's entirely powerless to stop, and in response Will just sort of... *folds*, slowly sinking down to the ground. He drags Hannibal down with him, carefully arranging them until he's on the floor with his back against the cabinets and Hannibal kneeling across his lap.

"I've got you," Will murmurs. He shifts, sliding his hand back until it sinks into Hannibal's hair, and then he gently guides the man's head forward, helping him tuck his face in against Will's own neck. "I've got you, sweetheart. That's it. Just breathe."

Hannibal thinks about Will sitting at the counter in the small hours of the morning, licking Hannibal's blood off his finger. He remembers, so very clearly, the words Will had said, still stuck halfway in Hannibal's headspace.

I remember anticipating the taste of blood, not because it meant killing but because it meant taking a part of you inside me.

He has the opportunity to return the favor now, to taste Will on his tongue, thick and bright and coppery – an opportunity Will has provided, willingly. Hannibal has not hunted him, has not *taken* from him. This is a gift. Will himself had called it an *offering*.

Will makes a soft sound, turning his head to brush his lips over Hannibal's cheek. "You okay?"

Hannibal nods, not entirely trusting himself to speak if he doesn't have to. His throat is tight, and there is a suspicious warmth burning in his eyes that threatens to spill over. Voicing any of the thoughts currently barreling through his mind might push it past a threat.

He feels Will smile, feels the soft puff of his breath when he speaks. "Can I make a request as to what you use it for?"

Hannibal swallows, gathering himself, and leans back. Blue eyes immediately find his, and Will's hand slides up his cheek so that the younger man's thumb can brush over the soft skin below his eye. "Will," Hannibal says fervently, honestly, "there is very little you could ask for at this moment that I would not grant you."

"Now that's just dangerous," Will replies. "You of all people should know better than to give someone like me that kind of power." He smiles, reaching out to brush a strand of hair back from Hannibal's forehead, and Hannibal wants to tell him that he's entirely serious – but then Will's eyes flash, dark and cutting for the briefest of moments, and Hannibal realizes that Will knows. Will knows exactly what he could ask for, the extent of what Hannibal would give him.

"Anything," Hannibal murmurs into the space between them, and he's close enough to see Will's pupils dilate, the black nearly eclipsing the blue of his irises.

Will takes a slow, full breath, and then lets it out in one big *whoosh*. "Something sweet," he says. "I have a specific dish in mind, if you're amenable."

Hannibal feels himself go tense, even as he nods for Will to continue. He does not believe in fate, and serendipity has never seemed to care for him, but blood is a very particular ingredient, and it limits the possibilities of what Will could ask for. *Something sweet* limits it even more.

"You'll have to forgive my Italian," Will says, and Hannibal's heart falters as his mouth goes dry. "It's *sanguinaccio dolce*."

Gutted, Hannibal thinks, a little distantly, *is a kind word for this feeling*.

He nods, a shaky, trembling thing, and forces himself to speak past the raw, open affection that's fluttering just under his skin.

"I would love to have you for dessert, Will."

After they collect themselves off the floor, a little while later, Will takes his usual seat at the counter. He doesn't offer to help, even as Hannibal begins to collect ingredients, and Hannibal is once again struck by how easily and thoroughly Will understands him. For all that it is *Will* going into the dish, it needs to be Hannibal's creation, and Will knows that without having to ask.

"*Sanguinaccio dolce*," Hannibal says, pouring sugar into a pot of slowly warming milk. Out of the corner of his eye he catches Will's smile, his gentle puff of laughter. "Your pronunciation was not that terrible."

"My pronunciation was very *French*," Will replies, his eyes dancing with amusement. "I think a Southern twang would have been less sacrilegious."

"Perhaps in Italy." Hannibal stirs the milk, waiting for the sugar to dissolve. "This particular dish is Neapolitan in origin. If I ever take you to Naples, Will, I will be sure to teach you a proper Italian accent."

Will's laugh is bright and honeyed, warm and sweet. "I look forward to it. You've been there before?"

Hannibal nods, humming softly. "I lived in Florence for a few years," he says, and he's taking a breath to continue when Will makes a sound that's all pure, unfiltered delight.

"*Florence?*"

Hannibal's hands falter as he begins to break apart pieces of chocolate. He was not trying to keep that aspect of himself a secret from Will, not really, but it is still an instinctual response, the urge to wrap himself around the identities he has kept so carefully hidden for so long. But Will, as always, responds to him with nothing other than joy and fascination, and, slowly, the tension in Hannibal's shoulders unwinds.

He looks up to see Will's eyes, bright and shining, and something inside him aches.

"Is that where you learned how to make this?" Will asks, nodding at the chocolate, and Hannibal swallows and adds it to the pot.

"It's where I first tasted it, yes," he says. "It is one of my favorite desserts."

The breath Will lets out is short, sharp. "I didn't know," he says softly. "We... I've made blood boudin before, but that's..." He shakes his head, and Hannibal can see the wheels turning behind his eyes as he tries to put his train of thought, his quick associations, into words. "You're the one who quoted Dante at Jack. That's what made me think of it, at first."

Hannibal arches one eyebrow.

Will smiles. "'*You thirst for blood, and with blood I fill you.*' It's *Purgatory*, not *Inferno*, but the sentiment still stands."

"And that made you think of dessert?"

Will's teeth flash as his smile widens. "No. That was... that first morning, you fed me sausage and eggs and that's the taste that was lingering on my tongue when I licked your blood off my fingertip. Hearty, savory. I wanted a contrast for your experience. So, sweetness."

Hannibal's fingers tighten around the wooden spoon in his hand and he takes a deep, slow breath. He can smell the warmed milk, the slowly melting chocolate, and under it all the faint scent of blood, still present, sweet and metallic. He shudders, licking his lips.

"*Ma moitié*," he says, and Will goes, all at once, almost preternaturally still. "A complement, not a reflection."

He turns to retrieve the blood from the refrigerator, and when he looks back at Will, he sees his own tumultuous feelings reflected back, awe and surprise and wonder etched into the lines of his face. He wonders, suddenly, how rare it is for Will to be understood, how odd it must seem for him to have the tables turned.

Will takes a breath, letting it out in a shaky, uneven puff. "*Ma moitié*," he repeats. "My better half. The ancient Greeks believed that humans originally had four arms, four legs, and two heads. They possessed such great strength that the gods felt threatened by them, and as a result Zeus decided to split them down the middle. The resulting humans were weaker, miserable, longing things, forever in search of the other half of their soul." Will pauses, reaching up to card a hand through his hair. "They also believed that, when two halves found each other, they would instantly recognize each other. There would be an understanding beyond comprehension, a unity between them that was quite literally divine in nature."

Hannibal's hands do not shake as he opens the bag of Will's blood, though he can hear his heartbeat in his ears, loud and pulsing. "So you see us as two halves of the same soul, Will?" he asks.

Will laughs, short and sharp. "I think we would have been more likely to have been *doing* the splitting than to have been split," he says, and something lurches in Hannibal's chest as he spills Will's blood into the pot of milk and chocolate, the scent of copper filling his nose. "You and I are whole without each other, a step above the rest even alone. We don't *complete*, we complement." He pauses, ducking his head. "Our whole is greater than the sum of its parts, Hannibal. We are each the other's better half."

Hannibal stirs the mixture and thinks about gods and altars and sacrifices, of blood and gold and power, and wonders if *Pan* is the most appropriate comparison for Will.

He wonders, if Will is indeed the god of the wild, what that makes him.

Hannibal serves them at the table, the pudding cradled inside half a hollowed-out blood orange and flanked by a pair of biscotti and a sprig of mint. It's a simple presentation, though no less beautiful for its lack of complexity.

He and Will sit across from each other, as they usually do, and as Hannibal takes his seat Will picks up his spoon. Hannibal expects... something. A moment of hesitation, perhaps, or a

reminder of the gift Will has given him, but instead all Will does is smile. “Thank you for making me this,” he says, as if Hannibal is the one who has done him the favor, and then he dips his spoon into the pudding.

He does pause, though, spoon raised halfway to his lips, his eyes fixed on Hannibal’s face. “Have you fed someone themselves before?” he asks, his voice idly curious, and Hannibal’s heart skips a beat.

“Yes,” he answers, throat dry.

“Not willingly, I assume. On their part, at least.”

Hannibal huffs a breath of laughter, though the sound seems far too fragile to have come from him. “You’d be correct in that assumption.”

Will’s smile goes sharp. “Good,” he says, and the blatant possessiveness in the word has heat curling low in Hannibal’s belly. But the feeling has nothing on the white-hot fire that licks up his spine at the sight of the spoon disappearing into Will’s mouth, laden with blood-black pudding, and reemerging a moment later, clean and empty.

Will lets out a soft, pleased sound, his eyes fluttering shut as his throat works. Hannibal sits and watches, all but frozen in place, as Will’s tongue darts out, licking over his lower lip before retreating back into his mouth.

“Blood and chocolate,” Will murmurs after a moment. His eyes slide open, immediately landing on where Hannibal’s spoon is hovering over his plate. “I can see why you like this so much. It’s almost obscenely decadent.”

Obscene, Hannibal thinks as he lifts his spoon to his own mouth, *is precisely the right word*.

The *sanguinaccio dolce* all but floods his senses as he closes his lips around the spoon. The scent of it in his nose, copper set off by the citrus of the vessel; the texture of it filling his mouth, smooth not like silk but like crushed velvet; and the taste spreading across his tongue, sweet and rich, the metallic edge of Will’s blood mixing with the slight astringency of the cocoa. Obscenely decadent indeed.

Across the table, Will makes a soft, strangled sound. “*Fuck*,” he whispers, just barely loud enough to be heard. The fingers of one hand flex and clench, and he looks, suddenly, like Hannibal remembers feeling: *guttled*.

Hannibal savors the lingering taste of chocolate before he swallows, and the muscle in Will’s jaw twitches, betraying just how tightly his teeth had been clenched. With hands that are visibly trembling, white-knuckled, Will sets his spoon down, shaking his head at Hannibal’s curious expression.

“I knew the ritual was important to you,” Will says after a moment, and Hannibal blinks at the sound of his voice, low and rough and ragged. “Cooking, serving, watching, eating. I understood the significance of it. I knew what it would mean to you.” He pauses and takes a

breath. “But I may have underestimated the effect seeing you consume a part of me would have on *me*.”

Hannibal feels, abruptly, as though someone has pried open his chest and wrapped their fingers around his still-beating heart. His pulse flutters, and the fingers squeeze, and he thinks *beloved* with enough intensity that for a moment he’s almost certain he’s said it aloud.

Oh, Will.

Hannibal gets to his feet, and Will’s attention snaps to him, his face unreadable. Hannibal does not attempt to offer reassurance – instead he simply circles to the other side of the table, taking the seat next to Will before reaching out and bringing his plate back in front of him. Then he settles his right hand on the nape of Will’s neck, his thumb laid carefully over Will’s trembling pulse, and picks up his spoon with his left.

As Hannibal had in the Bentley, when Will had curled his fingers around the back of Hannibal’s neck, Will recognizes the gesture for what it is. He sighs, shakily, his eyes sliding shut even as his fingers come to rest over his own spoon.

“Will,” Hannibal begins, and then Will’s hand is curling in the front of his shirt and dragging him forward. Will’s lips press against his own, hot and insistent, and the sound he makes as he licks the taste of his own blood from Hannibal’s mouth pierces Hannibal like a blade, sharp and thin and needy.

The kiss, desperate and frantic as it is, lasts only for a few moments. When Will pulls away, his breathing is just a little heavier and his eyes are just a little darker, and he smooths the front of Hannibal’s shirt out with a look that’s entirely free of regret.

“Anything,” Will says, his voice firm. Hannibal’s fingers tighten of their own accord, digging into the muscle of Will’s neck, but the younger man doesn’t flinch, doesn’t try to escape the touch, even as the tick of his heartbeat picks up.

You of all people should know better than to give someone like me that kind of power.

Hannibal takes in the glint behind Will’s eyes, the slowly easing set of his shoulders, the reddening curve of his mouth, and he knows there is no one else he would even consider.

He doesn’t need to ask to know that Will feels the same way. Hannibal has the steady thrum of Will’s pulse under his hand, and the taste of his blood in his mouth – and given who they are, *what* they are, that means more than words ever could.

Chapter End Notes

Hannibal, with anatomically-correct hearts in his eyes: “*I would love to have you for dessert, Will.*”

my reasoning behind *ma moitié* is super deep – Hugh Dancy spoke French on MasterChef Maroc and I kind of lost my mind over it. but also, Will grew up in Louisiana and would have been around Cajun French speakers, and the obvious choice to go with would have been *cher* but *my better half* allowed me to throw in another entirely unnecessary literary reference, so it had to stay.

also this very well may be my favorite chapter??? of this whole thing??? that says something about me, I'm sure, but at least my favorite chapter is the one with *consensual* cannibalism. anyway, I promised sappy romantic cannibal bullshit, so I hope this delivered ;)

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

“I wouldn’t move, if I were you,” Hannibal says, and Will has just enough time to breathe out half of a *what* before Hannibal sets his teeth ever so lightly over the bulge of Will’s trachea.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Nearly a week after he cuts Frederick Chilton open in an abandoned observatory, Abel Gideon is shot to death on Alana Bloom’s back porch.

The news makes Will’s toes curl in pleasure, wrinkling the black silk sheets of his and Hannibal’s bed, and Hannibal looks at him and sees the fire dancing behind his eyes and knows that he does not want to lose this.

Hannibal is not the kind of man to dither when he’s come to a conclusion. He sees no purpose in delaying, not when he already knows what needs to be done, what he *wants* to do.

The day after they receive the news, he makes two decisions. One of them is based in hope; the other, it could be said, is based in fear, though Hannibal feels that *practicality* is a much better descriptor. One of them is also far more legal than the other, though legality is a factor he doesn’t consider, outside of planning how to enact his decisions.

The shop he stops by for the less legal of the two enactments ostensibly specializes in “analog cameras, classic typewriters, and film development,” and though the cameras lining the walls inside are vintage, they are not the reason for his visit. The shop’s proprietor, a graying man in wire-frame glasses, looks up as he walks in, squinting from behind the counter in a manner that can only be described as *suspicious*.

“Morning,” the man says, somewhat gruffly. “What can I help you with?”

Hannibal retrieves two film canisters from his pocket and sets them on the counter. “I’d like to have these developed,” he says. The man nods, making an impatient grabbing gesture, and reaches out to snatch the canisters off the counter. Hannibal sees the brief moment of hesitation when he realizes they’re empty, but it’s only a moment. Hannibal only notices it because he’s looking for it.

“Right,” the man says, his lips pressing into a thin line before his mouth relaxes. “ID?”

From another pocket, Hannibal procures his own US passport and Will’s driver’s license, and hands them over. The man looks them over perfunctorily, and then nods. “Right,” he says

again, his eyes flicking up to Hannibal's face before returning to the documents in his hand. "I'll be right back. Don't move."

He turns and disappears into a door behind the counter, and Hannibal waits. Nearly fifteen minutes later, the man returns and gives Hannibal back his documents. "Twenty-five," he says. "And names."

An envelope comes out of Hannibal's jacket, thick and heavy. "Names are inside," he replies. "Can I expect them by the end of this week?"

The man all but snatches the envelope out of Hannibal's grasp, and Hannibal has to grit his teeth against the sudden inspiration that strikes him. He'd take tongue and kidneys, he thinks, and then cut the man's hands off and shove them down his throat. *Keep your hands to yourself, why don't you.*

Will, he thinks, would appreciate the tableau.

"Yeah, sure," the man says, thumbing open the envelope to count the bills inside. "End of the week. Be here Friday before close."

As he leaves, Hannibal makes a mental note to set aside some time for Friday *after* close as well.

He abhors loose ends. *Rude* loose ends simply cannot be tolerated.

He calls his tailor from the car.

"Doctor Lecter! How wonderful to hear from you. What can I do for you today?"

The genuine pleasantness in Christopher Hargadon's voice is a balm after the camera shop employee's abrasiveness. Hannibal sighs softly. "I'm calling for a recommendation," he says, and he doesn't bother trying to keep the smile out of his voice. "I find myself in need of a pair of custom rings."

There's a short pause on the other end of the line, and then Hargadon's voice comes through again, half-a-register higher than it was a moment earlier. "Rings?" he repeats. *"One would assume the purchase of a suit would precede the purchase of a ring, Doctor Lecter. Or an overcoat, if your intended is not the suit-wearing type."*

Hannibal thinks of Will, of his threadbare t-shirts and gray sweatpants, and chuckles under his breath. "He is in need of a suit," he admits. "Perhaps the next time you have a cancellation, give me a call."

"Nonsense." There's a brief rustling sound, and then Hargadon makes a sharp, pleased noise. *"There we are. Are you free this afternoon?"*

"Yes," Hannibal says. "But I doubt your schedule is open."

Hargadon scoffs. “*Come in at closing. We’ll get your man fitted. Now, for the ring. There is a shop in midtown I think might fit your needs...*”

He gives Hannibal the shop’s name, and the strictest of instructions to inform the owner that Hargadon is the one who sent him.

So Hannibal goes, and he informs the owner, who immediately smiles at him as if Hannibal is a long-lost family member. “Come in!” he says. “Have a seat. Now, did you have something in mind, or did you want to browse?”

In response, Hannibal takes a carefully folded sheet of paper out of his coat pocket. He unfolds the sketch and lays it out on the glass counter between them, and the other man leans forward to get a better look at it.

“Oh,” he says after a moment. “Oh, yes, we can do something like that. What stones were you considering?”

Hannibal smiles, his teeth feeling just a touch too sharp, and explains his vision.

Will’s only response to their afternoon appointment is a glance down at the clothes he’s currently wearing, faded jeans and a thick maroon sweater, and a single arched eyebrow. “All right,” he says, his gaze flicking up to Hannibal’s. “You can buy me a suit if that’s what you want to do.”

“It’s quite necessary, I’m afraid,” Hannibal replies, even though Will isn’t wrong. Hannibal does want to buy him a suit. He wants to buy him multiple suits. He wants to see the trim lines of Will’s body set off and highlighted in the way that only proper tailoring can achieve. “Some exceptions cannot be made, even for you.”

Will makes a curious sound. “Oh?”

“The opera is a black-tie affair.”

The eyebrow arches higher. “You’re taking me to the opera?”

Despite the lilt in Will’s voice, it’s not a question. Not really. It’s the same tone of voice Will had when he dug his fingernails into the back of Hannibal’s neck and murmured *Everyone is prey to you, aren’t they?* with downcast eyes and a predator’s smile twisting his lips. This time, the slip is subtle – a barely-there hardening of Will’s eyes, a clenching of his jaw, a shifting of his weight – and it’s there and gone again so quickly that it could easily have been passed off as a trick of the light.

“I’ve never been arm candy before,” Will drawls, “but sure.”

Hannibal finds he’s... surprised, at the easy acquiescence. He didn’t expect Will to balk, not exactly, but he did expect some sort of resistance, even if it was merely a token one. Something must show on his face, because Will smiles, canines flashing for a moment before he speaks. “I told you I wanted everything,” he says. “If that includes suits and opera dates,

then that includes suits and opera dates.” He pauses, laughing softly. “The other night you fed me a man’s *lungs*. A few hours of rubbing elbows with your Page Six clique isn’t going to be where I draw the line, darlin’.”

Hannibal wonders, briefly, how Baltimore’s elite would react to being called a “Page Six clique,” and decides that he must take Will to a showing as soon as possible. Mrs. Komeda, at the very least, would appreciate the tongue on him.

When they arrive at *Completo* later that afternoon, Will does hesitate for a moment, taking in the mannequins in the front window. He stares at them, and then turns on his heel to look at Hannibal. “I don’t know why I expected anything else,” he says, finally, though the faint twitching at the corners of his mouth belies any actual annoyance. “I assume all creative control is out of my hands?”

Hannibal lays his hand against the small of Will’s back, gently guiding him forward. “If it makes you feel any better,” he murmurs, “it’s out of mine as well.”

Will looks up sharply at that, his eyes narrowing, but before he can ask they’re inside the shop and Hargadon, a balding Italian man older than Hannibal and shorter than Will, is greeting them.

“Doctor Lecter,” he says brightly, his voice deep and lightly accented. He reaches out and clasps Hannibal’s free hand in both of his own, shaking it warmly. “And this must be your young man.”

Hannibal feels Will’s reaction, a brief stiffening of the muscles in his back before he relaxes again, letting out a soft chuckle. Will tilts his head back, just far enough to be able to meet Hannibal’s eyes. “Is that how you’re going around talking about me?” he asks dryly. “Just as your ‘young man?’”

Hannibal’s lips twitch into a smile despite his best intentions. “Will,” he says, “this is my tailor, Christopher Hargadon. Christopher, this is my...” He pauses, considering, and his grin widens. “My partner in crime, you could say. Will Graham.”

Will’s eyes flash dangerously, but he straightens and shakes Hargadon’s hand. “The pleasure is all mine,” Hargadon assures him. “Please, please, come in. I’ll need to get your measurements, my boy.”

The tailor ushers them into a spacious fitting room, furnished with plush armchairs and multiple mirrors and a small side table with a crystal decanter and two matching glasses. Hannibal takes a seat in one of the chairs, and Hargadon places Will in front of the mirrors. “Sweater off, please.”

Will meets Hannibal’s eyes in the mirror, electric blue holding amber for a long moment, and then he acquiesces, pulling his sweater off over his head. The shirt he has on underneath, Hannibal is pleased to see, is not nearly as threadbare as some of his others are. Will sets the sweater aside, and immediately Hargadon steps back to look at him, sizing him up. He nods to himself after a moment, and then turns away to a nearby rack, pulling off a crisp, white

shirt before handing it to Will. “For the measurements,” he says. “The fit will be much more precise.”

Will shrugs into the shirt, doing up the buttons while Hargadon selects a pair of black Oxfords from a shelf built into the wall. “These as well,” he says, when Will eyes them warily. “And if you could remove your trousers, please.”

Will purses his lips, but he toes off his own shoes and shoves his jeans down over his hips before slipping on the black leather Oxfords, and when he straightens, Hargadon smiles delightedly. “Perfect! Now, just relax. This will take but a moment.”

Hargadon takes out his tape measure and begins spanning it along lengths of Will’s body. Hannibal watches, sipping at his whiskey, taking in Will’s reactions. For the most part, he remains placid, letting Hargadon move his limbs as needed – Hannibal only sees a flare of fire behind his eyes when the tape measure goes around Will’s neck to take the measurement for his collar, but it lasts for a half-a-breath, and then it’s gone.

“Have you found a fabric or a cut you’re particularly fond of?” the tailor asks after a minute or two, and both Will and Hannibal laugh quietly. Will shakes his head when Hargadon looks up, eyebrows drawn together.

“I haven’t worn a suit since I was fifteen,” Will says apologetically. “My opinions on this are going to begin and end at ‘no plaid, please.’”

Hargadon looks as close to offended as Hannibal has ever seen him. “You, my boy, are far too classic a beauty for heavy fabrics and overt patterns. Subtlety is the way to go. Monochrome, I think. Don’t you, Doctor Lecter?”

“I defer to your expertise,” Hannibal murmurs. “You haven’t steered me wrong yet, Christopher.”

Hargadon looks Will up and down one more time as he finishes his measurements, and then disappears with a promise to return with “something perfect.” As soon as the sound of his footsteps recedes, Will turns to Hannibal, crossing his arms on his chest.

“You’re enjoying this.”

Hannibal takes a sip of his whiskey to hide his smile. “Is that so terribly wrong of me?”

Will snorts his laughter. “It’s terribly *something* of you,” he says, his expression what Hannibal can only call reluctantly fond. “I’m in a dress shirt, my boxers, and shoes so shiny I can see my reflection in them. I can’t help but think your experience with this was a little more dignified.”

Hannibal rises, taking his glass with him as he crosses the short distance to stand in front of Will. Before he can say anything, however, Will reaches out and plucks the glass out of his hand, swirling the amber liquid inside once before raising it to his lips and tossing it back.

Hannibal sighs as Will swallows. “That was a twenty-five year-old Macallan.”

Will hands the now-empty glass back. "Sounds fancy."

He smiles, his tongue teasing the edge of his teeth, and Hannibal has to resist the urge to lick the taste of the whiskey from his mouth. "It is a three thousand dollar bottle of scotch," he replies. "It is meant to be savored. Taking it like a shot is generally considered rude."

"Pour me another one," Will fires back, eyes flashing. "And I'll be sure to savor it properly."

Hannibal sighs again, but he pours, and this time when he hands Will the glass the younger man sips at it instead of knocking it back all in one go. He licks his lips after the first sip, and then beckons Hannibal closer, hooking his fingers into the lapel of Hannibal's jacket to tug him in flush so he can lean up and whisper in his ear.

"Your 'eating the rude' threat is a lot less threatening now that you've actually eaten me," he murmurs, his voice barely above a whisper. Still, electricity dances over Hannibal's skin, making his heart beat stutter.

"Will."

Will kisses the jut of his jaw, chuckling softly. "Later," he promises, and then leans back, the fire blazing in his eyes quieting to a banked ember as, a moment later, Hargadon returns to the room, a number of jackets and folded trousers draped over his arm.

"A navy," he announces. "And a tuxedo. We all know how much Doctor Lecter loves his operas. I believe that should be sufficient to get you started, Mr. Graham."

There is a box waiting on the front step when they arrive back home. Will is out of the Bentley first, so he is at the door first, scooping up the package and peering at the return label. Almost immediately, he looks at Hannibal, his eyes narrowed in accusation. "Karma Collars?" he says. "I'm not sure if Winston should be excited or if I should be worried."

"As I told you," Hannibal says as he unlocks the door. "We cannot have him looking like a stray."

Winston greets them excitedly, tail thumping against the wall as Will and Hannibal enter. He follows them into the study, where Will sets the package on Hannibal's desk and then gestures at it. "This is your deal," he says. "You open it."

Hannibal opens the package and takes out the three collars inside.

All three are leather, the material thick yet supple in his hands. He inspects the stitching briefly, ensuring the buckles are securely attached, but he finds no fault in the collars.

The first is a two-inch black band with Winston's name embossed into the leather in gold. The second is fashioned out of blue leather that is just a shade or two lighter than Will's eyes, set off with silver studs and buckles. And the third is a dark green with black braiding along the length of it, broken only by a small mockingbird charm set into the center of the collar.

He lays them out, one by one, on his desk, and when the third is displayed on the solid wood surface he looks up at Will, expecting to see the same fond annoyance he displayed over the suits. But that is not the emotion plastered over Will's face at all.

Tentatively, Will reaches out, the tips of his fingers tracing along the edge of the blue collar. "These are beautiful," he murmurs, something soft and reverent in his voice. "Hannibal, when you said... I didn't expect..."

"Quality is non-negotiable."

Will laughs a little breathlessly, and then nods. "Sure," he says, and then picks up the blue collar. He thumbs the buckle for a moment, and then crouches down, clicking his tongue at Winston. The dog trots over obediently, and Will buckles the collar around his neck, taking a moment to smooth his fur down around it.

"Perfect," he says, stroking his hand over the top of Winston's head. Will looks up at Hannibal, the corners of his mouth twitching up into a smile. "There, happy? He doesn't look like a stray anymore."

Hannibal doesn't say anything, though judging from the look in Will's eye, his pleased expression speaks for itself.

The passports, when they're finished, go into Hannibal's bedside drawer, and the camera shop's proprietor lives on only because Hannibal is not willing to risk drawing law enforcement's attention to him or his activities.

Hargadon summons Will back to *Completo* just over two weeks later. And he really does only call for Will – Hannibal, he says, is to wait at home, to ensure that when he sees Will, it will be with the final adjustments made and the suit perfected.

So Hannibal waits.

Hannibal is sketching when Will returns – Winston laying in a ray of sunlight, though the previous page shows Will with a spoon raised halfway to his lips and blood smeared over his teeth – and he looks up at the sound of footsteps. He's halfway out of his chair when Will turns the corner to his study, and the sight of him quite literally stops Hannibal in his tracks, freezes him mid-motion.

He'd expected Will to look good, of course. If the man looked ravishing in gray sweatpants and t-shirts, he could only look better in a tailored suit. But Hannibal isn't prepared for the figure Will cuts in the doorway to his study, not at all.

The suit is a deep cobalt, a slim fit cut to hug the sharp lines of Will's body perfectly. The jacket is buttoned over a shirt and tie, both blue as well, though the shirt is a few shades lighter and the tie rests between them – *monochrome*, Hannibal thinks, and makes a mental note to thank Hargadon the next time he sees him. Will is a work of art to begin with; framed like he is now, he is a *masterpiece*.

Will ducks his head, smiling slightly as his hands slip into his pockets and his weight shifts, almost imperceptibly, from one foot to the other. “You’re staring.”

“You’re beautiful.”

Color stains Will’s cheeks, and he lets out a breathless little laugh. “I see flattery comes quickly to you as well,” he says, and something in Hannibal’s chest twists and flares, bright and hot and blinding.

He takes the few steps forward necessary to put him close enough to touch, and then does just that, reaching out to tip Will’s chin up with one finger. Will meets his eyes without hesitation, though when Hannibal’s hand slides up to cup his cheek, he finds it’s still warm, still flushed. “Beautiful,” he repeats, and this time he’s close enough to see and feel the faint shiver that Will tries to suppress.

Will’s tongue darts out, wetting his lips. “You should take it off me.”

He looks almost coy, with his cheeks flushed and his eyelashes fluttering, but Hannibal is not the kind of man who makes the same mistake more than once. Will knows how to make himself look small, knows how to draw attention to the curve of his mouth and away from the fire in his eyes, but Hannibal has seen those lips curl around a not-quite-right smile and say *I only play at submission*.

But two can *play*, of course.

The hand on Will’s cheek slides back into his curls, and Will’s eyes flash dangerously as he realizes what Hannibal is about to do a split second before Hannibal’s fingers fist in his hair and pull his head back sharply. Will sucks in a breath as he’s forced to arch his neck, but he doesn’t fight it. He doesn’t snarl, either, like Hannibal half-expects him to. He just *laughs*, tight and breathless, and takes his hands out of his pockets so he can curl his fingers in the lapels of Hannibal’s jacket.

“Well, you’ve got me,” he says, his voice strained. His throat bobs as he swallows, and Hannibal watches as he tries to squirm just a little, to alleviate the strain of the position. “What are you going to do with me?”

Hannibal can see Will’s pulse clearly, a steady, slow throb on the side of his neck. Will is calm, with Hannibal’s hand in his hair and his neck bared forcefully, and it makes Hannibal want to ruin that calm. He wants Will’s blood to run hot, wants his pulse to beat rabbit-quick under his palm.

He leans down, nudging his lips against the cut of Will’s jaw. The younger man hums in pleasure, trying to lean up into the touch even though it makes Hannibal pull at his hair – or perhaps because it makes Hannibal pull at his hair – but he isn’t able to move much more than a centimeter or two. Happy, Hannibal moves his attention downwards, dragging his lips down over the stubbled length of Will’s neck, stopping to press an open-mouthed kiss over his Adam’s apple as his other arm slides around Will’s waist.

“I wouldn’t move, if I were you,” Hannibal says, and Will has just enough time to breathe out half of a *what* before Hannibal sets his teeth ever so lightly over the bulge of Will’s trachea.

Will freezes, his breath caught in his throat, held perfectly in place between Hannibal’s teeth. For a moment, nothing changes, and he’s perfectly still. And then, abruptly, Hannibal feels Will’s pulse jump under his mouth, and Will trembles in his arms, soft and faint and perfect.

Will takes a careful, ragged breath. Hannibal can feel it under his lips, the air passing through his trachea, into Will’s lungs and out again. It’s on the last drags of the exhale that he bites down just a little, actually pressing his teeth into the delicate skin covering Will’s throat. He doesn’t break it – not yet – but Will whines on a sharp inhale, and his pulse ticks up again.

Hannibal hums softly, sending another shiver rippling through Will’s body. His tongue slips into the space between his teeth, dragging lightly over the part of Will’s throat trapped in his mouth, and the sound Will lets out resembles a whimper more than it does anything else.

He bites down just a little harder, and the paper-thin skin under one of his canines gives. Will cries out, sharp and reedy, but he still doesn’t move, and Hannibal feels heat flare at the base of his spine at the realization.

You don’t have to worry about rustling in the bushes when you’re at the top of the food chain, when you know everything in the shadows will run away from you instead of towards you.

Hannibal carefully removes his teeth from Will’s throat, instinctively lapping at the drop of blood that wells up immediately. Will shivers violently at that, though the motion is still controlled by Hannibal’s hand in his hair, by Hannibal’s arm around his waist.

Will’s palms flatten against his chest, but they don’t push him away. They just brace there, a counterpoint against Hannibal’s hands on Will’s body, a reminder that, as much as Will is *caught*, he isn’t and he never will be *prey*. He’ll always run towards Hannibal, towards his teeth and the promise of his violence, and not away.

Hannibal drags his tongue over the small wound again, and this time Will groans, pressing up towards Hannibal’s mouth. “Fuck,” he mutters, his voice all but wrecked. “Clothes off. *Now*.”

Chuckling, Hannibal brushes a kiss over Will’s pulse. “Be patient,” he murmurs, and Will *snarls*, his fingers clawing at Hannibal’s chest through his shirt.

“You shouldn’t have put your *teeth* on me if you wanted *patience*.”

Will’s hips rock upwards abruptly, and Hannibal hisses at the contact, at both the sudden friction against his own cock, hot and hard in his trousers, and at the feeling of Will’s arousal pressed up against his thigh. His focus falters for the briefest of moments, the grip he has on Will’s hair relaxing just a fraction, but that’s enough. Will surges upwards, his arms sliding up around Hannibal’s neck, and then those plush, slick lips are pressed against Hannibal’s own and Will’s tongue is plunging into his mouth, licking the taste of blood from his teeth.

For a few moments, everything becomes lost in a flurry of movement and fabric. Will shrugs out of his jacket as Hannibal begins undoing the buttons on his pale blue shirt, and as soon as

the jacket is thrown over one of the side tables Will is fumbling with the button on Hannibal's trousers, biting at the line of the older man's jaw while he tries to drag the garment down past his hips.

They do manage to get each other undressed eventually, and when they do Will immediately pushes Hannibal down onto the sofa, climbing into his lap as soon as he's able to. He sinks down, grinding their hips together, and Hannibal has to clench his teeth and dig his fingers into the soft curve of Will's hips to stop from bucking up into the contact.

Will's hand works its way between them, fingers swiping over the head of Hannibal's cock. He repeats the gesture once, twice, and there's a groan working its way free from Hannibal's chest when suddenly Will's fingers are gone.

Hannibal blinks, a little dazedly, and, *oh*. Not gone, he realizes, his mouth going dry as that groan manages to tear itself free. Will has one hand braced against Hannibal's chest, an anchor, a support, but his other is behind him, between his legs.

As if he feels Hannibal's eyes on him, Will looks up. His pupils are blown wide, his cheeks tinged pink, and he's panting ever so slightly, his breath hitching every time the arm that's tucked around behind him moves. Of its own accord, one of Hannibal's hands moves, sliding past Will's hip and over the curve of his ass, until his own fingers are flush with Will's, teasing against the rim of his hole.

The moan Will lets out is a tremulous, broken thing, and Hannibal finds himself dragging his hand back to his own cock. He strokes himself once, twice, gathering the pearls of slick fluid on his fingertips so that, when he returns to tease at Will's rim, he can do more than tease. Will sucks in a sharp breath as one of Hannibal's fingers slips in beside two of his own, and his cock jerks between them.

Hannibal leans up, pressing a kiss to the hollow of Will's throat. "We have proper lubricant upstairs," he murmurs, though it's half-hearted, and Will laughs, sharp and reedy.

"Don't need it."

Hannibal sets his teeth over Will's trachea again, just because he can, just because it makes Will's breath hitch and makes his muscles tighten in a way Hannibal can feel *intimately*, now, with his finger buried up to the third knuckle in Will's body. "Fuck," Will breathes when Hannibal relaxes back against the sofa, his throat bobbing. "All right, all right. Enough."

Hannibal lets his hand fall away with Will's, despite the soft, almost bereft sound Will makes at the loss. Almost immediately, he shifts forward, taking Hannibal's cock in one hand and guiding it back so that the head nudges against his hole. Hannibal's hands immediately return to Will's hips, holding him in place.

"Slow," he says, and something flashes behind Will's eyes, something fiery and fierce and *dangerous*. He shifts, his nails digging into Hannibal's chest, and then he purposefully rocks back and sinks down onto Hannibal's cock.

It's not fast, but it's not slow either. It's steady, inexorable, and Will doesn't give either of them time to adjust, to grow accustomed to the feeling. The sudden vice-tight heat around Hannibal's cock steals his breath away, makes every muscle in his body lock up in an effort *not* to thrust up and cause Will actual harm. And Will is not unaffected either. Hannibal sees it play out on his face, sees the fire bleed away into something shocked and open as he settles in Hannibal's lap.

"If you wanted *slow*," Will breathes, his voice a trembling, rough thing, "you shouldn't have put your *teeth* on me."

And then he begins to move.

It's not slow. Will braces his hands against Hannibal's shoulders and he uses the leverage, pushing himself up before letting gravity pull him back down. The clench of his body loses a little of its stranglehold on Hannibal's cock, but with only the barest minimum of prep and natural slick to ease the way, every impossibly tight, hot drag of Will's body stays impossibly tight and hot.

Will rides him for his own pleasure, shifting and twisting and seeking the correct angle until a moan drags itself out of his throat and a shiver ripples up the length of his spine. Then he repeats the motion again, and again, driving his own pleasure higher as he picks up the pace.

Hannibal's fingers have begun to tremble when the sound of his phone ringing cuts through the fog of pleasure.

Above him, Will pauses, and Hannibal nearly snarls, digging his fingers into the younger man's hips. "Ignore it." His voice is almost a growl, rough and cutting, but Will doesn't seem to hear him. He sinks down, settling in Hannibal's lap, and then turns, looking over his shoulder at the table beside him. "Will," Hannibal says warningly, and the phone rings again.

"It could be important," Will replies, with just enough of a spark in his voice to have Hannibal fighting for mental clarity. He's still ordering himself mentally when Will leans over to the side, relying on Hannibal's grip on his hips to stop him from falling as he digs Hannibal's phone out from the pocket of his pants. Hannibal has just enough time to see the name flashing on the screen before Will swipes his thumb across the screen and lifts the phone to his ear.

"Hi, Jack," he says, the hand that's not holding the phone settling over Hannibal's mouth, and Hannibal's teeth *itch* to bite, to sink into the meat of his palm. Will smiles at him, biting his lower lip, and then rocks his hips forward ever so slightly. It's the tiniest amount of friction, but Hannibal is close.

Whether he's close to orgasm or murder is still up for debate, however.

"Sorry," Will says. "I saw the caller ID and figured I should answer in case it was something important. Hannibal's got his hands full at the moment, but I can pass along a message if you want?"

Will listens for a moment, and then his eyes flick to Hannibal's. "Of course," he says. "Thanks, you too."

Hannibal moves as soon as he sees the call has ended. It's easy to turn them, to roll his hips so that he can press Will back into the sofa and cage him in, hovering over him. "You're a terribly rude little thing," he mutters under his breath, and Will laughs, throwing his head back and baring the length of his neck. There's not an ounce of fear in him, not even with the stormy expression Hannibal *knows* is gracing his own features, not even with the fact that Hannibal's teeth had been set against Will's throat not a half-hour ago.

Will gasps at the first roll of Hannibal's hips, and scrabbles to clutch at his shoulders at the second, and by the time Hannibal has a rhythm of short, sharp thrusts that drag the head of his cock over the swollen mess of nerves that is Will's prostate, Will is nearly shaking apart in his arms. He's panting in Hannibal's ear, his breaths coming in sharp little hitching gasps, and his cock is laying against his belly, leaving streaks of white against his skin with every jerk and twitch.

Hannibal is riding the edge by the skin of his teeth, the pleasure built so high that it's nearly teetered into pain, and he has excellent control over his bodily responses, but even his control only extends so far. He knows he's not going to be able to hold off his orgasm much longer, so he works one hand between them, wrapping dexterous fingers around Will's blood-hot, swollen length.

Will *keens* at the touch, his eyes flying open, and he bucks into Hannibal's loose grip once before he flies apart, spurting across his chest and stomach. And as he comes, the vice-like clench of his body becomes almost unbearably tight, and it doesn't so much tip Hannibal over the edge as it drags him, headfirst.

He collapses onto his elbows as the rush of endorphins takes his breath and stability both, leaving him with just enough presence of mind to not crush Will underneath him. For a long moment, the only sound in the room is their shared breathing, fast and rough and uneven, but slowly it begins to calm, and Hannibal finds the strength and coordination to raise his head from its resting place on Will's shoulder.

He's immediately struck by Will's expression. The younger man's eyes are closed, and his face is absolutely relaxed, the faintest of smiles pulling at the corners of his mouth – if Hannibal had to put a name to it, he would call it *bliss*.

The smile grows as Hannibal watches. "You're staring," Will says, and his voice is still a little rough, a little ragged, but mostly he sounds sleepy and content.

Hannibal swallows, and then, very carefully, leans up and presses a kiss to the corner of Will's mouth. "You're beautiful," he murmurs, and Will's answering laugh is soft and sweet and perfect.

It's not until they're tucked into bed, Will's head pillowed comfortably on Hannibal's shoulder, that Hannibal thinks to ask. "What did Jack want?"

Will yawns. “There was a scene he wanted you at,” he answers, shifting a little closer to Hannibal. He throws an arm across his waist, and then turns to look up at him, blue eyes almost electric in the dark of the room.

“He said it looked like the Tooth Fairy.”

Chapter End Notes

[Will's blue suit](#), in case anyone has not had the pleasure of seeing this wonderful photo.

fun fact: Christopher Hargadon was Hannibal's (supremely talented) costume designer. if I have to have a named OC, they'll always have a ridiculously meta name. (Cecelia Danlos was named after Cecilia Bartoli, an Italian opera singer, and Ehlers-Danlos, a connective tissue disorder.) it's kind of silly but it also falls in line very neatly with my need to over-research everything, so it stays.

we are now 2/3 of the way through this monstrosity! I've lowkey been preparing for Summer of Whump while writing (“lowkey” – I have **25** possible fills outlined, send help) and sketching out chapter outlines of *three* other Hannigram fics, and y'all have no idea how excited I am to deliver all this content.

coming up next: someone is unforgivably rude, and the Mimic strikes again. and a little bit later: Hannibal encounters a ~~slim and delicate~~ somewhat feral pig.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

The tableau comes to life on the backs of his eyelids, blooming in brilliant technicolor: elevation and derision, acknowledgement and insult, the setting, the trophy.

Chapter Notes

CW: more graphic corpse desecration, and some implied not-quite-yet-a-corpse desecration

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Blood paints the snow in bright red swaths, arterial spray and castoff both splattering the once-immaculate landscape with ragged arcs of *life*. The scene is primal, raw, and it's familiar in a way that has Hannibal biting his tongue as soon as he arrives.

He knows this killer.

Jack sighs, scrubbing a hand over his face. He always looks worn, looks tired, but there's an extra heaviness to his eyes, a bit more drag in his movements. He's wearing himself thin hunting these killers, and if Hannibal were a better man he would warn Jack off, tell him to take some time for himself or hire more bodies to help spread the load.

Hannibal is not a better man, and so, instead, he *pushes*.

"My apologies for missing your last call," he says, noting that even Jack's annoyed glance lacks its usual power. "I was otherwise occupied. Will mentioned you suspected the Tooth Fairy?"

Jack nods tersely, and Hannibal understands the reason for the tension in his shoulders and the bags beneath his eyes. It's been nearly a month since Jack's last call, the one Will took on Hannibal's behalf. "It's eleven days until the next full moon," Hannibal notes, almost idly, and Jack turns away with a frustrated sound.

"Can we focus on the murders in front of us?"

Hannibal resists the urge to smile and returns his gaze to the blood-soaked snow around the bonfire. It isn't difficult to picture the series of events that created the scene in front of him, though he supposes he has a bit more insight than the others do. He licks his lips, considering

how much information he wants to divulge – if Randall Tier truly has come into his own, as this scene suggests he has, a visit from the FBI won't be enough to shake him.

"It is not an animal," he says, drawing Jack's attention back towards him. "It is a man who wishes to be an animal."

Jack's exhale clouds the air in front of him. "Does he believe he's an animal?"

"It is not about belief," Hannibal replies. "Rather, it is about what he imagines."

"Well, what does he want?"

Hannibal looks over the scene again, taking in the overt violence, the impersonality. "He wants *prey*," he says after a moment. "Agent Crawford, psychosis such as this, this fully developed, does not simply go unnoticed."

Jack looks up sharply, his eyes narrowing either at Hannibal's tone or his carefully selected words. "Have you seen something like this before?"

Jack, Hannibal knows, will wait until the preliminary autopsy results are in to begin confronting suspects. He will want all information at his fingertips, and that will give Hannibal enough time to make a housecall, if needed. He nods, and then gestures for Jack to step a little ways away from the techs and CSIs gathering evidence around the remains of the bonfire.

"This threatens to be a violation of doctor-patient confidentiality," he says in a low voice, "so I will tread carefully. Years ago, I treated a patient who I believe fits this profile."

He tells Jack of Randall Tier in vague, broad terms, and idly wonders how much sleep the man will lose over this case.

Hannibal isn't surprised to find that, when he tracks Randall Tier down, it's to the Museum of Natural History. Academia has always provided a layer of plausible deniability for those whose masks don't fit quite correctly. In certain lines of work, at certain levels of education, you're no longer considered strange – you're merely eccentric.

"You will always be ruled by your fascination with teeth," he tells the young man, but Will's words are the ones that echo back in his own head. *You shouldn't have put your teeth on me if you wanted patience.*

Hannibal remembers purposefully putting Tobias Budge in Will's path, providing inspiration, and something inside him balks at the idea of doing the same thing with Randall. Will's savagery, he knows, would be beautiful, but it's the thought of Will slipping into Randall's head, *becoming* him, that sets Hannibal's teeth on edge.

"It's been a long time since you treated me," Randall says, wary by nature, and Hannibal hears the unspoken question. *Why are you here?*

He smiles, showing his own teeth, sharp and uneven. “I’ve seen what you’ve done, and I’m not the only one. They’re looking for you.”

Randall doesn’t look surprised. He barely reacts at all. What frame of reference, Hannibal wonders, does a predator have for being hunted? “I don’t think I can stop,” Randall says, and Hannibal’s smile widens at the certainty that’s present in his voice, even if it’s absent from the actual words.

“I don’t want you to. But they will find you, Randall. And when they do, it’s important you do exactly what I say.”

The next day finds Hannibal back in the BSU’s lab, observing as Price and Zeller present their findings.

“The closest comparative bite radius we could match to the victim’s wounds is a cave bear,” Zeller announces, patting a plaster reproduction of a skull. “But a cave bear did not do this.”

“Mostly because they’re vegetarian,” Price continues, “and have been extinct for twenty-eight thousand years.”

Zeller goes on to launch into a spiel about biteforce, which draws Jack’s attention, but not Hannibal’s. Hannibal finds his gaze diverted to the hallway, where he sees Beverly Katz walking alongside an alarmingly familiar figure. As Hannibal watches, she guides Randall right past the examination table where Zeller is still fondling the skull, ensuring that he sees everything – Hannibal included. Randall’s eyes meet Hannibal’s for the briefest of moments, but it’s long enough for Hannibal to see something dark and primal flash behind them.

As soon as Randall is out of earshot down the hallway, Jack rises, turning to Hannibal. “You recognized him?”

Hannibal nods, trying to anticipate what this turn of events will mean. Jack, however, doesn’t give him time. “Good,” he says. “I wanted him to see the skull. If he’s not the killer, it won’t mean anything to him. But if he is, it might throw him off-kilter a little. I’m willing to take any edge we can get with this one.”

Hannibal nods again, and Jack steps out into the hallway. “Would you mind sitting in on the interrogation, Doctor Lecter?”

Hannibal swallows, hesitating. “If Mr. Tier becomes aware of my involvement,” he begins, attempting to couch his reluctance as a concern for his career, but Jack waves a hand.

“You were well within your legal right to break confidentiality,” Jack says. “This is a... specific crime, and the perpetrator has a specific mindset. You recognized it, and understood the very real threat of it happening again. If Tier comes at you with a lawsuit, you have the FBI’s legal team at your disposal.”

Forcing a smile, Hannibal ducks his head in acceptance, though it’s not a *lawsuit* he thinks Randall will choose to unleash upon him, given the opportunity. “Very well,” he says. “Shall

we?”

Randall is waiting for them in an interrogation room, his hands folded neatly on the table in front of him. He looks calm, if a little resigned, though his eyes linger on Hannibal for a moment when the two of them take their seats across from him.

Jack opens a file on the table, adjusting a few papers. “Randall Tier. I’m Special Agent Jack Crawford. And from my understanding, you’ve met Doctor Lecter.”

“We’re familiar,” Randall replies evenly.

“It’s good to see you again, Randall,” Hannibal offers, and the younger man looks at him sharply before turning back to Jack.

“I was told you had some questions for me?”

Jack nods. “What is it you do for a living, exactly?”

“My official title is ‘Curator.’” Randall rubs his palms together, and then seems to catch the nervous motion and stops. “But that’s not really descriptive of what I do. I’m a mount maker, mostly. I build and maintain the armatures that support the skeletons we have on display. I put them together, take them apart, and put them back together again.”

“So it’s fair to say you understand their mechanics – these armatures – and how they’re engineered.”

Randall smiles, but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “Yes, I think that’s fair to say.”

Jack nods, looking down and appearing to make a note of something in Randall’s file. “The reason I ask,” he says after a moment, “is because we have reason to believe someone has used a skeleton – a cave bear skull, to be exact – as a murder weapon.”

Hannibal watches as Randall lets mild interest show on his face. “Prehistoric jaws and claws are designed to do what they do best.”

“The victims were torn apart,” Jack says, voice flat. And then, a little more cordially, “You have a history of trouble with things like jaws and claws.”

Randall’s eyes flick over to Hannibal again, though there’s no primal fire in them now. They’re empty, void, emotionless, not the stare of a predator but the glassy-eyed gaze of a taxidermied kill. Hannibal shifts, muscles coiling in anticipation. Nothing *good* can come from Randall having accepted his end, having already slipped into the empty headspace of death. And then, slowly, the young man blinks, turning back to Jack.

“Is that what this is about?” he asks, just enough offense in his voice for it to sound genuine. “You think I killed someone with a fossil?”

Jack raises his eyebrows and shrugs, and Randall sighs. His fingers clench and curl, flexing before settling again, showing his agitation at having to discuss his past without it being

overt. “I had an identity disorder,” he says. “The doctors told me the internal map of my body didn’t match reality. Do you know what it’s like when the skin you’re wearing doesn’t *fit*?”

Hannibal thinks of Will, of the ease with which he melts into someone else. *What do you call a shapeshifter who keeps his skin and changes his soul?*

Randall Tier is Will Graham’s antithesis, the embodiment of everything he is not, and the realization has Hannibal reconsidering his commitment to keeping the two of them away from each other. He’s curious how Will would let Randall bleed through, what parts of him Will would allow to grow fangs and claws, if only so that Will could use them to create his own tableau.

But he only considers it for a moment. He does not want any version of Randall Tier standing in the doorway to his bedroom – not even one that’s wearing Will’s face.

“I can imagine,” Jack says, with sympathy in his voice even though the words are patronizing.

“I know who I am now,” Randall insists. “And I’m doing much better. I’m socializing. I take my medication. I’m employed. And I work very hard.” He pauses, taking a breath. “And I’m proof that mental illness is treatable.”

For a long moment, Jack just looks at him, and Randall holds his gaze, resolute. Hannibal knows what’s going to happen even before Jack rises and holds out his hand and thanks Randall for his time, because *Hannibal* is the one who ensured Randall knew what to say. He is, at the moment, the author of his own misfortune.

But the situation is salvageable.

Hannibal waits until Jack has shown Randall out of the room, handing him off to Beverly for an escort out of the building, and then he rises, straightening his jacket. “None of what he said precludes him from being the killer we are looking for.”

Jack turns back to glance at him. “The kid seemed pretty well-adjusted,” he says dubiously. “Did you get a different read?”

Hannibal nods. “I noticed a few... concerning indicators. They could be nothing, of course. Being questioned by the FBI can trigger stress responses even in the innocent.”

Jack purses his lips, his own instincts warring with his respect for Hannibal’s, and he falters, glancing back out into the hallway.

“Perhaps we could discuss this further in your office,” Hannibal suggests, and some of the tension eases from Jack’s shoulders.

“Yeah,” he says, “all right.”

It’s dark when Will gets home, though it’s not terribly late, and Hannibal’s Bentley is still missing from the driveway. He sighs, and Winston, perched happily in the passenger seat,

mimics him, huffing a loud, dramatic breath before turning to look at Will and letting his tongue loll out of his mouth.

“Yeah, well, you wore me out too,” Will mutters, and smiles when Winston’s tail thumps against the seat. In the moonlight, he can just barely see the collar he’s wearing, the green one with the mockingbird emblem. Hannibal was right, of course – Winston no longer looks like a stray – but that is not the reason for the tightness that always seems to curl in Will’s chest at the sight of the collars. Not entirely, at least.

Reaching over, he opens the passenger side door for Winston, laughing when he all but bounds out of the car. Two hours at the dog park, it seems, didn’t touch his energy reserves. He’s halfway out of the car himself when he hears it, Winston’s low, rumbling growl, quiet but unmistakable in the still evening air.

The gun strapped to the underside of his seat is in his hand in a moment, and though the weight of it is familiar, it’s not comforting by any means. Will is all-too aware of how easily a weapon can be turned on its owner, how easily something intended for defense can become an implement of murder.

He whistles sharply once, and then again a moment later when Winston ignores the first summons. The growl grows in volume, but then Winston appears around the bumper of the car, teeth bared and hackles raised. As soon as he’s at Will’s side, he turns back to face the cluster of trees near Hannibal’s house, another snarl tearing its way out of his throat.

“Come,” Will says sharply, keeping his eyes on the treeline as he heads for the door. He’s not sure what’s out there, but he’s not keen on either of them finding out. “Winston! Come.”

With one last growl at the trees, Winston trots up to the porch, following Will inside when he gets the door open. As soon as he can, he closes and locks it behind them, and the lock sliding into place alleviates a little of the sharp awareness he’s suddenly feeling. Not all of it, but a little.

He doesn’t turn on the lights as he makes his way through the house, unwilling to make himself more visible to whatever is outside. *Whoever* is outside. Will’s instincts tell him he’s being hunted, and he doesn’t know of any animals in *Baltimore, Maryland* that would hunt a man into his own house.

When the attack does come, he’s ready for it.

The *thing* crashes through the glass doors at the back of the dining room, barreling toward him with a grinding roar. Will steps neatly to the side, and the thing hurtles past him through a few dining chairs, too large and unwieldy to turn on a dime, and makes that sound again as it slides to a halt, turning to face him once more.

Will realizes, belatedly, that it wasn’t a roar at all. It’s the sound of a *motor*.

The man in the motorized skeleton lunges for him, jaws open wide, but Will doesn’t focus on the teeth or the claws – he focuses on the part of the *man* that he can see, those dark, bottomless eyes that glitter behind the animal mask.

He catches the attacker square in the cheekbone with the butt of his gun with a hard, backhanded swing. It's not enough to incapacitate, but the man staggers, disoriented, and this time Will is the one who attacks, who *pounces*, knocking the skeleton-clad intruder to the ground with a kick to his chest. The man falls, and Will follows him down, tearing at the mask before they've even really hit the ground, and he snarls when he's finally able to tear it free and toss it aside.

The man underneath the mask is young, baby-faced even, but Will doesn't hesitate. He hits him, *hard*, two blows in quick succession that send the man's head rocking to the side, first with a dazed expression in his dark eyes, and then with nothing, his body going limp beneath Will's.

He's not dead. Will can feel the steady rise and fall of the man's chest beneath his own thighs, under the monstrous suit he's wearing. Will looks down at the unconscious form beneath him and waits for the shift, the *slip*, but it doesn't come. There's no slide of another presence into his mind, no weight of another force of will settling over his own. Frowning, Will takes in the machinery, the contraption the man has encased himself inside, all bone and glistening metal surrounding well-oiled pneumatic joints. It's a skeleton, but it's clearly a custom piece, handcrafted, put together bone by bone until it was perfect.

Will looks at the man's face again, and then, slowly, he looks over at Winston, pressed into the corner and trembling faintly, and thinks he might understand.

He closes his eyes, then, and takes a breath, and when he slips it's not into the simple, animalistic thoughts of the unconscious intruder, but into a much more familiar, intricate mind, one that's been tucked away in the back of his own head for weeks.

The tableau comes to life on the backs of his eyelids, blooming in brilliant technicolor: elevation and derision, acknowledgement and insult, the setting, the trophy. *Trophies*, Will thinks, and the image shifts, suddenly, the details sharpening with the clarity of *memory* and not imagination. They slot themselves into place around the tableau the *other* in Will's mind has built, and the perfection of it threatens to bubble up out of his throat in a gasping, desperate breath.

Oh, he's going to enjoy this.

Hannibal doesn't realize something is amiss until he crosses the threshold. From the outside, his house looks normal, as it does every day when he comes home, but the inside is a different story. Shattered glass litters the floor of the dining room, the remnants of the glass doors spread out in thousands of glittering pieces. That is not the extent of the destruction, however. A number of chairs are broken, smashed to jagged pieces and thrown awkwardly against the wall, though the table itself seems to have avoided any permanent damage. As Hannibal picks his way through the mess, he sees blood as well, a handful of dark, dried droplets and smears.

From upstairs, he hears the sound of Winston scratching at the door to Will's room, asking to be let out, but he sees no sign of the man himself.

His first call to Will's phone rings and goes to voicemail. His second does as well. On the third he hangs up before the automated female voice can start talking just to redial immediately, and it's only practicality that stops him from dialing a fifth time when Will fails to pick up again.

Wherever Will is, Hannibal must assume he's there willingly. He had the time and ability to shut Winston away behind a closed door, something neither of them have done for a long while, and Hannibal can only imagine Will did that in *reaction* to the shattered glass on the floor. And while Hannibal can't be sure, exactly, of what happened in his absence, given the timing he can make a guess.

He remembers the emptiness behind Randall's dark eyes, and tries not to imagine the same expression lingering in Will's.

But dwelling on it, he knows, won't do any good. Unless he intends on getting in his car and searching Baltimore street by street, there isn't anything he can do for Will until he chooses to come home – but he can ensure that the home Will comes back to doesn't look quite so disastrous.

With a sigh, Hannibal shrugs out of his jacket, draping it across one of the unbroken chairs. Carefully, he rolls up his sleeves. And then, with one last look around to survey the extent of the damage, he gets to work.

The sun is beginning to tint the sky pink by the time Hannibal hears a car pull up in the driveway.

The dining room is as clean as it's going to get – the remnants of the broken chairs have been gathered together and moved outside to be burned later. The glass has been swept up and disposed of. There is little Hannibal can do for the hole in the wall, though he plans to call a contractor as soon as it's an appropriate hour to do so.

But those thoughts bleed from his mind as he hears tires crunching on gravel. On quick, silent feet, he slips into the kitchen, his fingers curling around one of the knives in the block on the counter. He hopes it's Will, returning home. He has to believe it's Will. But he also has to prepare, in case whatever comes through the door isn't *his* Will.

Hannibal waits, muscles coiled, as one car door slams shut. He hears keys in the lock in the front door, then the soft sound of the door swinging open, and then steady footfalls as someone makes their way down the hall to the kitchen.

Will comes to a halt at the entrance to the kitchen, his eyes immediately flicking to the knife in Hannibal's hand. Hannibal takes him in, searches him for traces of Tier's carefully-concealed brutality, of his ill-fitting skin, but he doesn't see *Randall Tier* in the dispassionate set of Will's eyes or the ever-so-slightly haughty tilt of his chin. He doesn't see *Will* either, though, and it becomes even more evident when Will steps into the kitchen that he's not entirely himself.

"Are you planning on using that?" Will asks, inclining his head over so slightly to indicate the knife. He doesn't look bothered by the implication. If anything, there's a small smile

teasing at the corners of his lips, like he's *pleased* at the sight, but Will has always been particularly difficult for Hannibal to read, and now... now it's as if there's a curtain behind his eyes, blurring the edges of anything that might have been visible.

No, Hannibal thinks suddenly. *Not a curtain. A veil.*

He'd only caught a glimpse that first night in the Bentley, Will's fingernails digging into the back of his neck while his accent shifted, slipped into something with less of a drawl and more of a lilt. Seeing himself reflected back in blue eyes had been a shock then; now it's less surprising, though the realization has the hair on the back of Hannibal's neck trying to stand up as thousand-year-old instincts recognize another predator in the room.

Carefully, Hannibal sets the knife down on the counter, and he doesn't miss the way Will's eyes follow the blade until Hannibal's fingers release it, immediately flicking back up to the older man's face as soon as he's no longer holding the weapon. He holds Hannibal's gaze for a moment, blue and blood-flecked amber caught up in each other, and then Will nods slowly, looking away with a sigh.

"I'll be the first to admit I'm not the most tolerant person," he says, his eyes wandering over to the dining room. "But attacking someone in their home really is unforgivably *rude*." He looks back at Hannibal. "I don't suppose the name 'Randall Tier' means anything to you? Lying in wait outside someone's home in a servo-powered skeleton suit feels a little bit like a personal vendetta to me."

Hannibal takes a breath. "Randall Tier is a former patient of mine," he says, "and a suspect in a current FBI investigation."

Something dances behind the veil, something cold and cruel and shapeless, though it doesn't take much effort for Hannibal to be able to put a shape to it. "Would it be more correct to say he *was* a suspect, Will?"

Will ducks his head, hiding, Hannibal suspects, a smile that's far too pleased to show. "I told you I was saving the best for last," he murmurs, taking a few more steps into the kitchen. As he comes into the light, Hannibal takes him in, looking for injuries, for anything concerning, and he doesn't see anything of note until he sees Will's hands properly. The sight of his knuckles, scabbed over but still red abraded, draws his attention, so much that he doesn't properly register the words for a moment.

Last time, Will's words had been preceded by *one day* – now, it seems, that day has arrived. And, like the last time Will said them, Hannibal chooses to ignore them and what they could mean, though it's impossible to ignore the tight curl of *something* in his chest.

"Did you kill him with your hands?"

Will looks down at his knuckles, as if only just now noticing the red smeared across the backs of them. Then he flexes his fingers and shakes his head, his eyes returning to Hannibal's. "I didn't beat him to death, if that's what you're asking," he replies evenly. "His end was a little more... involved than that."

Hannibal pauses. "Some deaths are more intimate than others."

Will laughs sharply at that, showing teeth. "Intimate isn't the word I would use," he says. "But I don't want to spoil the surprise."

Hannibal nods, turning away to the cabinet to retrieve a shallow bowl. The first aid kit comes out from under the sink, and both get set on the counter next to the sink. "Let me bandage your hands for you," he says, and Will hesitates for only a moment before acquiescing.

As Hannibal gently washes dried blood away from Will's knuckles, he glances up at the younger man's face, noting with a sharp twinge of disappointment that the veil seems to have been pulled in tighter. He considers saying nothing – at best, he himself is mildly uncomfortable when Bedelia mentions his veil, his person-suit. At worst, he entertains thoughts of how he would serve various parts of her at his table. He wants to incite neither of those reactions in Will. But he doesn't want the veil to stay, either. The tableau is complete – there's no reason for Will to keep Hannibal's mind pulled so tightly around him.

"Where have you gone, Will?"

Will huffs a breath, not a laugh, but not a sigh either. For a moment, he's silent, watching as the water in the bowl slowly turns pink, and then red as his own blood stains it, and when he speaks, his voice isn't quite his own, but isn't quite the same as it was, either. "Nowhere," he says quietly. "My muse is right here. Where would I go?"

Hannibal does not answer as he wraps Will's knuckles in gauze, does not allow himself to think of an answer as he dumps the bloody water down the drain, or as he follows Will up the stairs to their bedroom. For a moment, as they're undressing, he thinks of Will's quiet voice, far too pleased, and how it had curled around *I told you I was saving the best for last*, and then he pushes that thought from his head too.

Later, after Hannibal has seen Will's tableau, after Will has shed his veil, they can discuss *last*.

They get into bed together even as sunlight streams through the window, and Will curls against Hannibal's chest, tucking his face in against the older man's neck. Hannibal can feel the steady puffs of his breaths, the rise and fall of his chest, the way his eyelashes flutter as he blinks slowly.

Will's breaths eventually even out into sleep, but Hannibal's do not. He's only been laying there for an hour or so when his phone rings, sharp and abrupt in the quiet morning air, and he feels more than hears the quiet sound of amusement Will makes, sleepy and soft, and the barest lift of his chest as he laughs.

"You should get that."

Hannibal hesitates only for a moment before leaning over and picking up his phone, and he's not surprised to see the familiar name on the screen. He answers, but before he can even voice a greeting Jack cuts him off.

“I need you down here. We’ve got a problem.”

Hannibal looks up at Randall Tier’s body with an odd mixture of awe and unease curling in the pit of his stomach, and wishes he’d had the opportunity to see Will construct the scene before him.

It’s beautiful.

The body was found at the National History Museum, though when Hannibal walks through the front doors, Jack does not lead him to the exhibits full of skeletons of long-extinct creatures. Instead, Hannibal finds himself in the diorama hall, looking in on a collection of taxidermied sika deer in a summer woodland setting.

The body is there, mounted in the antlers of one of the bucks. The arms and legs dangle down towards the ground, the weight of them forcing an arch into the back that seems to proffer the body’s abdomen to the sky. But the arch of the back or the almost graceful cascade of the limbs isn’t what draws the immediate attention.

From the crown of his head to the tips of his toes, there’s not an inch of skin left on Randall Tier’s body. Red muscle and white fat glisten in the diorama’s lights, so intricate in detail, so *vibrant* in color that the entirety of it almost appears unreal.

Hannibal commits the sight to memory.

The abdomen is its own offering. The CSIs have not yet removed any of the lovely flowers that fill the body’s abdominal cavity, little things with white petals and yellow centers, but they’ve looked around them and determined that the flowers are there *in place* of the organs. Everything that once filled the space is gone.

The flowers fill the body’s mouth and eye sockets as well. Really, there’s nothing left to immediately identify the remains as Randall Tier – Hannibal knows only because of Will. Jack Crawford and his team, however, have come to the same conclusion, albeit by a slightly different route.

“We won’t know for certain until we can get dental records,” Price says. “But if we’re assuming this is a Ripper scene, which...” He trails off, gesturing vaguely at the body. “Yeah. The Ripper doesn’t choose his flowers at random. They’re always *meaningful*. So I went and looked these ones up. *Ranunculus ficaria*. It’s a type of celandine. Now, celandine is typically used to represent Spring and joy and happiness, which didn’t exactly strike me as correct in this instance, so I looked *again* and found that *ranunculus ficaria* goes by another name: Randall’s White.”

Jack looks over at Hannibal. “We’re operating under the assumption, for now, that this is Randall Tier. The museum said he didn’t report in for work this morning, and he wasn’t at home when we sent an officer to check on him. Now we’re just looking for a reason for the Ripper to target Tier.”

Hannibal takes a breath. “I imagine determining Tier’s guilt in the matter of the deaths he was being investigated for would help with that. Historically, the Ripper has only targeted other killers when they... attempted to infringe upon his territory.”

Zeller snorts. “You mean when they tried to steal the spotlight,” he says. “I don’t know. *Mauling* people doesn’t exactly seem like something a guy like the Ripper would be threatened by.”

Jack snaps something back, but Hannibal is no longer listening. He takes a few steps closer to the body, careful to keep his hands in his pockets as he leans in, peering at the lines of muscle along Tier’s leg. Some fibers are severed, as though a layer was taken off the top – collateral damage, Hannibal thinks, from a knife working its way between the layers of skin and muscle.

Do you know what it’s like when the skin you’re wearing doesn’t fit?

Hannibal shivers despite himself. Will peeled back the layers of Randall’s being, the construction of his animal self and the skin he felt so uncomfortable in, leaving behind only bone and blood and muscle. A carcass. Meat, and nothing more.

“So what do we know?” Jack asks sharply, drawing Hannibal back into the moment. “Do we have time of death?”

Hannibal looks up in time to see Price, Zeller, and Beverly all exchange a look. “We have an estimate,” Beverly says. “The whole abdominal cavity was left exposed, so liver temp wasn’t really an option.”

“And there’s no liver,” Price adds.

Beverly sighs. “And there’s no liver. The eyes were destroyed when the flowers got shoved into the sockets, so they’re no help. And there’s no skin, so there’s no blood pooling. Rigor puts time of death somewhere between four and twelve hours ago, but without skin providing insulation, that’s the best we can estimate. The studies just haven’t been done on how being flayed affects the progression of rigor.”

“I can’t imagine it’s a common occurrence,” Hannibal says quietly, and Jack sighs.

“What can you tell me about that, then? Why skin him?”

“Oh, this one I might know,” Price says, and there’s just enough giddy pride in his voice to draw a *look* from Jack. “Listen, I wrote a paper my sophomore year of undergrad on... you know what, never mind, it’s not important. Anyway, reasons for skinning a body generally fall into one of two camps: a show of disrespect for the dead person, or a need for the skin.” He pauses, tapping his pen against his cheek. “But I don’t think it was an actual need for the skin that drove this particular, ah, act.”

Jack nods. “Explain.”

“Historically, flaying victims were softened up a little first,” Price says. “They’d be put out in the sun until they burned, or they’d be boiled in water. Either method helps detach skin from the muscle underneath and makes it easier to peel off. Keeps it all in one piece. But not this guy.” He points his pen at Tier. “His skin did not come off easily. You can see how sections had to be cut away; it’s all uneven. The skin would have come off in pieces. It would have been ruined.”

“Of course,” Zeller adds, “it’s also uneven because the killer *took* more than organs.” He looks down at his clipboard, flipping a page over, and then looks back up at Jack and Hannibal. “I’m not sure whether to explain this as anatomy or as... cuts.”

“Are you a scientist or a goddamn butcher?” Jack snaps.

“Fine, fine, Jesus.” Zeller looks back at the clipboard. “The lower halves of both latissimus dorsi and serratus posterior inferior are missing. The entirety of the left rectus femoris is gone, along with most of the biceps femoris and the semitendinosus. And it looks like the left and right trapezius were both taken as well.”

Jack sighs, and his jaw works as he thinks about what he’s going to say. “And as cuts?” he asks, finally.

“Loin, shank, and, well, what would be chuck, I guess.”

Hannibal makes a sound, low in his throat, drawing Jack’s gaze. “Apologies,” he says. “I’m merely considering the selection. The Ripper is usually very... particular, is he not?”

“Picky is the word I would use,” Jack says dryly. “Why?”

“Chuck is a sub-prime cut of meat,” Hannibal replies. “It’s an odd choice.”

“I’ll add it to the list of ‘odd’ this case is collecting.” Jack takes a deep breath, and then shakes his head slightly. “All things considered, do you think this is the Ripper?”

Before Hannibal can answer, Zeller turns away from the body, his face wrinkled in distaste. “I’ve got another thing to add to this carnival of horrors,” he says. “We’ve got signs of post-mortem clotting in the blood vessels remaining around the neck and thighs, and those areas are pretty clean. Not a lot of bleeding. But those are the only places.”

“In English, please,” Jack asks with a sigh, and Zeller turns to Beverly, his eyes pleading.

“Our killer skinned the areas near major veins and arteries last,” she says, “and it wasn’t just because of personal preference.”

Jack still looks lost, but understanding blossoms in Hannibal’s mind. “The only reason to avoid veins and arteries is to prevent blood loss,” he says, “which is only a concern if it’s still possible for the victim to bleed out.”

“You’re telling me whoever this was skinned Tier *alive*?” Jack’s voice is pitched with disbelief, but when no one moves to correct him, he sighs, reaching up to pinch the bridge of

his nose. “The Ripper’s taken trophies from his victims while they were still breathing before. This is an escalation, but it’s not entirely out of character.”

“Technically, the skin is the largest organ in the human body,” Price offers, raising his hands in surrender when Jack turns to glare at him. “What? Just backing you up.”

There’s a moment of silence, and then, in a voice that’s uncharacteristically tentative, Beverly says, “So, this is probably going to sound crazy.”

Zeller snorts his laughter, gesturing vaguely at Tier’s body. “We’re kind of running with crazy, in case you didn’t notice.”

Jack ignores Zeller, turning to give his attention to Beverly, and Hannibal does the same. Beverly looks anxious, her arms crossed tightly over her chest as her teeth worry absently at her bottom lip.

“What are you thinking?” Jack asks.

“Do you guys remember the Minnesota Shrike?”

Jack’s expression goes confused as Hannibal calls up the details of the case in his mind. Admittedly, he does not immediately see the connection. The Shrike *honored* his victims, loved them by proxy – none of that sentiment is echoed in Will’s scene.

And then Beverly says, “Now, do you remember Cassie Boyle?”

“The Copycat killer,” Hannibal says, except that’s not quite right. They’d called him that at first, until Jack had drawn connections to a handful of other scenes stretching out across the continental US, all of them an imitation of a different active killer.

After that, they’d had a different name for him.

The confusion has faded from Jack’s expression, replaced with a reluctant sort of disbelief. “You think this is the Mimic,” he says, and Beverly nods. “All right. Walk me through it.”

“It’s not just one thing,” Beverly says. “It’s everything, together. The way the body’s mounted is almost exactly like Cassie Boyle’s was. The... overt disrespect brings the Mimic case to mind too.”

“The Ripper isn’t exactly *respectful* of his victims,” Jack points out. Behind him, Price laughs under his breath.

“Beverly’s right,” he says. “This guy saw himself as something primal. A predator, I guess. The Ripper would have done *something* with that. This display definitely reduced Tier down to his most basic parts, but not as a predator. I mean, this is what you do with animals after you catch and kill them, right? You skin and gut them.”

I’m a good fisherman, but I’m an excellent hunter.

“Hunters,” Hannibal interjects, and four pairs of eyes immediately focus on him. “Apologies, I’m simply thinking out loud. But I believe that’s the connection you are looking for. Garret Jacob Hobbs and Randall Tier were both *hunters*, not predators. Perhaps our killer is simply showing that he’s a better one.”

Jack just shakes his head. “The Mimic only copies active killers. Garret Jacob Hobbs is dead. Why would he suddenly break his pattern and resurrect an old MO?”

“I don’t think he did,” Beverly says. “I think this *is* him imitating the Ripper. The throwback to Hobbs is deliberate, but it’s not how he executed the kill. It’s like a... calling card. He’s just letting us know that he’s around.”

“He wants to be seen,” Hannibal murmurs, and Jack just sighs, scrubbing a hand over his face.

“So the Mimic is in Baltimore, and he’s made the Ripper his next muse.”

“He wants to be *seen*,” Zeller mutters, sarcasm heavy in his tone. “Great. *Great*. I hope this guy knows what he’s getting into. Historically, the Ripper doesn’t exactly *share* well.”

The jeweler calls as Hannibal is leaving the museum.

The detour is a quick one. Hannibal inspects the rings, and, upon finding no flaws, writes a check. The rings go into a small wooden box lined with black velvet, and the box goes into Hannibal’s pocket.

And then Hannibal goes home.

He finds Will in the dining room; or, rather, outside the dining room, just past the threshold of the doorway which used to hold the lovely double glass doors. He’s affixing a tarp to the outside of the house, and when he ducks back inside, he gives Hannibal a knowing smile. “I know it’s not ideal,” he says. “But until we can get someone out here to fix it, we need some protection from the elements. It’s cold.”

“I will call someone today,” Hannibal says, and then swallows as he considers what he wants to say. Will straightens, turning to face Hannibal fully, ever-observant – more so now, considering whose eyes he’s seeing the world through.

“So,” he says, something anticipatory dancing behind the veil, “what did you think of my tableau?”

I like to be seen. Sometimes.

“Jack’s team made the connection to the Minnesota Shrike,” Hannibal says, and Will’s eyes flash, the veil all but disappearing for a moment. For a breath, Hannibal sees *Will*, sees pride and passion and a vindictive pleasure, and then the gossamer settles again and everything blurs. “Though they also acknowledged that the scene was very obviously meant to be an imitation of the Ripper.”

Will smiles, showing teeth. “I would have asked them over if I wanted to know what they thought, Hannibal.”

Hannibal conjures up the scene in his mind, reliving the experience of seeing it for the first time. “My first thought,” he says after a moment, “was how I wished I could have witnessed you in every moment of the process.”

Will’s shoulders relax, rolling back, and the pleasure on his face softens. “And your second thought?”

“It’s beautiful.”

Will closes his eyes and inhales deeply, and when he lets the breath go, Hannibal hears it tremble in his throat ever so slightly. With his eyes still closed, Will licks his lips, and then he smiles gently, the corners of his mouth barely turning up. “If the Mimic was going to be seen here in Baltimore,” he says quietly, “it was going to be through the lens of the Ripper.”

He opens his eyes, and Hannibal expects to see *Will*, to see the veil drop away. But that’s not the case. The shroud is still there, keeping Will walled off and protected, tucked away in his own mind, and the sight is so unexpected it makes something catch in Hannibal’s chest.

Without any conscious thought from Hannibal himself, his hand falls to the rings in his pocket. He palms the rise of the box, and wonders, suddenly, if trying to bind Will to his side will only encourage him to vanish faster.

Perhaps, he thinks, Will only wanted to be seen so that he could disappear.

Chapter End Notes

without Will investigating the Shrike, Hannibal wouldn’t have had a reason to display Cassie Boyle, so I attributed her killing to the Mimic. still “a” copycat killing, just not “the” Copycat killing. and Tier’s tableau got adjusted as well – show! Will wanted to honor Tier for his part in Will’s becoming, but Mimic! Will just kind of wanted to punish him for the *audacity* of breaking into Hannibal’s house.

if you’re worried about the angst potential for the next few chapters, just know everything is gonna work itself out. I promise. note the happy ending tag! it’s right after “corpse desecration.”

(I love this fandom so goddamn much)

P.S. I am having a (minor) surgery at the end of this week (4/21/22), so there is a good chance the next chapter might be delayed by a few days. I don’t expect recovery to be awful, but I just wanted to give y’all a heads up since I’ve been somewhat regular with updates and I feel bad about (potentially) breaking my streak.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Will's eyes go sharp, suddenly. "What does 'frightened' taste like?"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The rings join the passports in Hannibal's bedside drawer that same afternoon, and Hannibal does not allow himself to think about the finality of the drawer closing. He doesn't not think about the rings, and he does not think about passports or the names they bear; instead, just as he puts the rings away somewhere safe physically, he tucks the thoughts of them away in his mind palace as well, to be revisited at a later, safer date.

He calls a contractor immediately after, and promises to pay an exorbitant after-hours fee to have them at the house the next evening to take measurements and provide something more solid than a tarp as a temporary solution. Another twenty-four hours with the room all but exposed to the elements is less than ideal, but the dining room can be closed off from the rest of the house.

Then, with nothing left to delay him, he heads back downstairs.

Will is waiting for him in the kitchen, dressed up and dressed down all at the same time: the jeans slung low on his hips are worn and faded, but the black button-up he's wearing with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows is new, the lines of it still crisp. He smiles at Hannibal, although the veil, still in place behind Will's eyes, stops the older man from seeing anything other than the gentle pleasure and faint amusement Will is purposefully projecting.

"I thought we could do dinner a little differently tonight."

Hannibal raises an eyebrow as he steps into the kitchen, taking in the canvas grocery bag on the counter. "I'm listening," he says, taking a moment to wash his hands. As he's drying them, Will begins to unpack the bag: a package neatly wrapped in butchers' paper and a bunch of tomatoes still on the vine come out first.

"How about this," Will says. "I provide the ingredients, and you tell me what we should do with them."

It's a deviation from their norm. Normally, Hannibal cooks and Will watches, providing commentary at most and sneaking tastes of whatever raw ingredients he can at the very least. The sanguinaccio dolce was his first true involvement in one of Hannibal's dishes – this is yet another step in that direction.

Hannibal looks down at the wrapped package. “What’s the meat?”

The corner of Will’s mouth twitches, but he doesn’t answer. Instead, he reaches out and slides the butchers’ paper package across the counter towards Hannibal. “What do you think?”

With deft fingers, Hannibal unwraps the package, spreading the paper out to reveal the cut of meat inside. It is loin, most definitely, and he knows what he wants the source to be. But the cut is Will’s, so the reveal, if there is one, is his as well. “Veal?” Hannibal suggests. “Pork, perhaps.”

Will chuckles under his breath. “He was a somewhat feral pig.”

Hannibal looks up sharply, catching Will’s eye, but other than a faint trace of humor, he sees nothing. Will had been practically brimming with anticipation when he’d given Hannibal his own blood, the excitement of toeing a new line, of breaking a new boundary evident in his body language. But there is no tension in the Will before him, no set in his jaw or shoulders to indicate this is anything *new*.

Even with the shroud still in place, he thinks there would be *something*, a shadow of bubbling emotion or a brief, hidden glint of agitation. Hannibal can only assume, then, that the cut of meat is pork. Beef would have been better, given the other ingredients Will has laid out on the counter, but Hannibal is flexible. Substitutions can always be made.

“I’ll make you lomo saltado,” Hannibal decides after a moment of deliberation. “We will make it together.”

The dish is not a complex one, even with Hannibal’s elevations. It is not something he would serve at a dinner party, too heavy and hearty for anything other than a single-course meal, but for the two of them, for *Will*, he does not mind.

The scent of cumin and cilantro fills the air as Hannibal plates the lomo saltado, a Peruvian inspired pork stir fry. Traditionally served with pommes frites, Hannibal has instead laid roasted red potatoes alongside the marinated pork, rice, and bell peppers, and garnished the dish with sliced scallions and pickled red onions.

He and Will take their seats across from each other at the table, and usually, Will doesn’t hesitate to tuck in. In fact, he’s *never* hesitated to eat the food Hannibal has set before him, not even that first time in the small hours of the morning, when he would have had the best of all excuses. But he hesitates now, his fork in hand and his veiled eyes fixed on Hannibal, and it takes a moment for Hannibal to realize what he’s waiting for.

He wants Hannibal to eat first.

Something tight and fluttering coils in Hannibal’s stomach, and suddenly Will’s shroud looks almost intimately familiar.

Hannibal capitulates, ducking his head in acknowledgement, and lifts a piece of the meat to his mouth. The flavor bursts over his tongue, sharper than he expected underneath the cumin

and chili, and he knows his surprise shows on his face because he sees it reflected back in Will's. "The meat has an interesting flavor," he says after a moment. "It's... brazing. Notes of citrus."

Will's smile is a delicate thing as he lifts his own fork to his mouth, chews, and swallows. "My palate isn't as refined as yours," he replies, almost apologetically, except there's not an ounce of apology in his eyes. Instead, Hannibal sees a request there, a desire for an explanation.

What makes it interesting?

Hannibal makes a soft, considering sound. "Apart from humane considerations, it's more flavorful for animals to be stress-free prior to slaughter." He pauses, taking another bite, and that same edged flavor bursts over his tongue. "This animal tastes frightened."

Will's eyes go sharp, suddenly. "What does 'frightened' taste like?"

That Hannibal knows, and intimately. "It's acidic."

The sound that leaves Will's throat is closer to a chuckle than anything else. "The meat is bitter about being dead." He pauses, and then he shakes his head, this time allowing himself to laugh, and Hannibal can't help but allow himself a soft smile as well.

"This meat is not pork," he says.

Will's eyes flick up to his, and to Hannibal's surprise and relief, the veil is gone. The blue there is vibrant, open, and Hannibal can see the depth of the playful, satisfied feeling in them when Will replies, "It's long pig."

The breath Hannibal lets out is shakier than he would have liked. He licks his lips and reaches for his glass of wine, knowing that Will will see it as the steadying gesture it is but needing it all the same. "I prefer sins of omission to outright lies, Will," he says after a moment, "but I'm fond of neither."

Will shrugs one shoulder. He stabs a bell pepper with his fork, raising it to his mouth. "You're the one who called it pork," he says, and then pops the bell pepper into his mouth, chewing a handful of times before swallowing. "I've already told you, it's not my responsibility to correct other peoples' perceptions."

Hannibal pauses. "You wanted me to perceive this as pork."

Without the veil in place, the flash behind Will's eyes is obvious and bright, and the smile that spreads across his face doesn't seem disconnected. "I was mimicking the Ripper. I don't make a habit of leaving my work incomplete, Hannibal."

"The tableau was complete."

Will huffs, the sound somehow fond and annoyed all at once. "We both know your MO doesn't end with the tableau. It ends with feeding your friends the fruit of your labor while

they assume they're eating cuts you acquired from your ethical butcher." He pauses, cocking his head slightly. "I'll remember about the stress, though, for next time."

Next time. Hannibal takes a breath, wondering, exactly, how *next time* fits with *last*. "Next time?" he asks. "Surely this cut wasn't all you took from your... somewhat feral pig?"

Shrugging, Will shakes his head. "No, but if the meat's not up to your standards, I won't sully your kitchen with it again. Winston won't have any opinions regarding acidity, I don't think." At the sound of his name, Winston perks up from his station in the hallway, though when neither of them call him over, he lays back down with a despondent sigh. Will chuckles under his breath. "The cuts won't go to waste." He looks over at Hannibal, his eyes narrowing slightly. "You seem surprised."

Hannibal manages a smile. "Constantly. I never seem to be able to predict you, Will."

Will sets his fork down, turning his attention fully onto Hannibal. "That's not the part you're surprised about, though," he says, his voice quiet. His eyebrows are drawn together, his expression confused. "It wasn't how soon I planned to repeat, it was... it was that I planned to repeat at all."

Hannibal sighs. "You 'saved the best for last,'" he says tightly. "I am... unclear, as to what 'last' means in this situation."

Almost immediately, Will's expression softens. He's out of his chair a moment later and around to the other side of the table, bending down so he can take Hannibal's face ever so gently in both his hands. At the soft touch, Hannibal finds his eyes fluttering shut, finds himself leaning into Will's palms almost against his own volition.

"Hey," Will says, his voice gentle. "Do you trust me?"

Hannibal sighs. "Unequivocally, against all better instincts."

Laughing softly, Will smiles, his thumb brushing over the ridge of Hannibal's cheekbone. "Then *trust me*. This 'last' has nothing to do with you, *ma moitié*."

Ma moitié. My better half. Hannibal thinks of the ancient Greeks and how they believed so strongly in the idea that there was another person in the world created for them that they created mythology based around the idea. He wonders how it was possible for them to have taken comfort in the idea that they were fundamentally incomplete, that they had been torn in half, forcibly separated from their other halves because someone else feared their power.

Hannibal knows he would survive separation from Will – he has survived much worse – though knowing that makes him no more eager to experience it.

"'Last' implies an ending."

The corner of Will's mouth twitches up. "That it does."

It is irksome that, with Will's hands on his skin, Hannibal cannot even summon the irritation he wants to press into his voice. He does his best, but when he speaks, it comes out sounding

more forlorn than anything else.

“You’re not going to tell me what is ending?”

“I think I’ll have the opportunity to show you.” Will’s thumb caresses his cheek once more before his hands drop away. “And I’d rather show you. A tableau is worth a thousand words.” He winks, blue eyes flashing, and then he returns to his side of the table, sinking down into his seat once more.

Hannibal takes a steadying breath. “You have plans for another kill?” he asks after a moment, and Will looks up, smiling at him from under his lashes.

“Something like that.”

The Tooth Fairy strikes again, in Baltimore, on schedule.

The victims are an all-American family: mother, father, two children, a dog. The crime scene itself is far more *American Psycho* – Zeller’s words, not Hannibal’s – with enough blood spatter and trace evidence to keep the crime lab busy for weeks.

Jack does not want this taking weeks. Hannibal is sympathetic. If the Tooth Fairy sticks to his schedule, they have four weeks until his next set of murders, which, in terms of forensics and planning a sting, is not very long at all.

“What can you tell us?” Jack asks, looking down at the body of Mrs. Leeds. “Anything at all. Doctor Lecter. We’re all grasping at straws here.”

Hannibal sighs, well aware of how desperately Jack needs a nudge in the right direction. His team, given enough time, will arrive at the correct conclusions, but Jack isn’t willing to give them the time or the manpower they truly need.

Hannibal has no special interest in this Tooth Fairy. He has no issue pointing Jack towards him.

“Biting behavior in violent crimes can be attributed to one of three offender typologies,” he says after a moment. “Impulsive, controlling, and cannibalistic. The first is rooted in anger, the second in sexual sadism, and the third, while less understood than the the first two, is often assumed to be related to ego-centric or personal power issues.”

Jack’s eyes flick down to the body. “We’ve seen cannibals before. This doesn’t strike me as that.”

Hannibal resists the urge to smile. “Indeed not. I believe our offender falls firmly into the first category. These bites were all administered post-mortem – there was no intent to cause pain, because no pain could be caused. No flesh was removed from the body either. In children, this behavior often manifests as what we tend to see as ‘experimental biting.’ The mouth is simply another means with which to explore the world. As children grow, they’re taught this

impulse is incorrect and impolite; however, with some children and adolescents, the lesson simply doesn't stick."

"So he's biting because he's... *curious*?"

Hannibal shrugs. "Curiosity can be as dangerous a motivator as any, Agent Crawford. But I suspect, whatever his reasoning, it falls in line with why he placed shards of broken mirror on the eyes and mouths of his victims."

When Hannibal doesn't continue, Jack makes a 'go on' motion. "And why is that?"

"He needs a family to escape what's inside him."

"Jesus." Jack scrubs a hand over his face. "All right. Let's see if we can get impressions from the bite marks. And dust every single shard of glass for prints. If there's even a chance of getting this guy through AFIS, I want to run it down."

As the techs begin their work, Hannibal excuses himself, taking the stairs back down to the main floor. He's quiet, light on his feet, and he supposes that's the only reason he catches an all-too familiar fiery head of curls bent over the hardwood floor, camera in hand, taking pictures of bloody bare footprints.

"Has this poor family's home not been defiled enough?" he asks dryly, and Freddie startles with a low gasp, spinning on her heel and thrusting her hand out in Hannibal's direction. There's a soft snick as a blade slides out of the knife in her hand, locking into place and gleaming in the low moonlight.

Hannibal glances down at the switchblade, raises an eyebrow, and then looks back up at Freddie. "Trespassing and menacing an FBI consultant," he says. "My, my, Miss Lounds. Would you like to stab me and make it an even three for three?"

Freddie's eyes are wide and a little wild, but she regains control of herself quickly enough, flicking the blade away before slipping the knife back into her jacket. "I'm not trespassing," she says stiffly, straightening her back as if that will make her short stature any more impressive. "One of the officers outside let me in."

"Oh, I'm sure there's plenty of blame to be spread around." Hannibal smiles thinly, holding his arm out towards the door. "Shall we? What kind of gentleman would I be if I didn't escort you to your car? Especially seeing how..." He pauses, considering. "How agitated you seem you be."

Freddie does not take his proffered arm. *Rude*, Hannibal thinks, even as he straightens. If there weren't so many witnesses...

"I have reason to be agitated, in case you're not aware." Freddie puts the lid on her camera lens, and Hannibal smiles slowly.

"Ah, yes, I heard. Your encounter with the Chesapeake Ripper."

Freddie's flinch is minute, mostly hidden, but visible all the same. "I'm just being prepared," she says, hoisting her bag over her shoulder. "Now, if you'll excuse me, Doctor Lecter, I'm afraid I have somewhere else to be."

Hannibal ducks his head in acknowledgement, watching as Freddie leaves the house. *Lungs*, he thinks idly. *Lungs and tongue. She's made enough use of them, I think.*

"So why do they call him the Tooth Fairy?"

Will has his hands laced together over Hannibal's bare chest and his chin resting on his hands. Even in the early hours of the morning, his blue eyes are bright and focused, their gaze lingering on Hannibal's face even if the focus of his mind lies elsewhere.

Hannibal shrugs one shoulder, careful not to dislodge Will from his perch. "Our lovely Freddie Lounds granted him that moniker. I believe she drew on the nocturnal nature of his crimes and the bite marks he left on his victims for inspiration."

"It's a stretch," Will admits. "Not her best work." He pauses, turning his head down to press his lips to Hannibal's pectoral. "That's not all though, is it? You saw more there than you told Jack about. Or you deduced more than you told him about."

Hannibal smiles, reaching down to card gentle fingers through Will's hair. "Clever boy," he murmurs, and Will *preens*, nuzzling up into the touch before turning his head up to nip at Hannibal's palm. "I believe our killer, whoever he may be, is in the midst of a change. A transformation."

"A becoming," Will says, real interest in his eyes now. "Huh. Families, you said? And only on the full moon?"

For a moment, Hannibal doesn't answer. He imagines Will slipping into this killer's headspace, imagines him dispatching of a family before sinking his teeth into them, one by one, blood dripping down his throat and over his jaw. He imagines Will naked in the moonlight, the blood on his pale skin so dark it's almost black, rearing up towards the night sky like a beast from hell.

It would be beautiful. *He* would be beautiful. And yet...

"Hey." Will scratches a nail over his chest, drawing his attention. "Jealousy isn't a good look on you."

Hannibal makes a short, noncommittal sound, and Will sighs. "He's... interesting," he says after a moment. "Finding him would be tricky though. His schedule is too spaced-out to be convenient."

"Making plans for your tableau?"

Will smiles. "I'm thinking about it," he says. "Still putting details together. But what you said about his transformation admittedly caught my attention."

“I don’t suppose you’ll tell me *why*.”

Will turns his head, pressing a kiss against the inside of Hannibal’s wrist. “Soon,” he murmurs. “Not yet, but soon. This one will be worth the wait, darlin’. I promise.”

Chapter End Notes

so I finally watched *Fresh* and let me just tell y’all that the scene where Sebastian Stan dances in the kitchen while butchering the leg now lives rent-free in my brain. there’s a non-zero probability that a *Fresh*-AU will make its way into my Summer of Whump fills. (also, if anyone else has seen it, were you mildly disappointed by the ending? I felt like they teased us with... more, in the trailer? but maybe that was just me looking at it with Hannibal glasses on).

three chapters left here at *altered souls*. I know I’ve got some loose ends to tie up – some of them look pretty *ginger*, don’t they?

(P.S. surgery went well! I’m sore but otherwise okay, and relegated to the couch, which means Hulu marathons and writing stuff!)

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Freddie Lounds' death is the complete antithesis of her life: private, unassuming, and *quiet*.

Chapter Notes

CW: mind the tags is all I can say. Blood As Lube - no penetration is involved, but there's definitely blood and sex. and the sex occurs while there's a body in the room.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Francis Dolarhyde,” Will says one day, seemingly out of the blue, nearly two weeks after the murders of the Leeds family.

Hannibal looks up at him. They're in his study – Will is sprawled over the sofa, one foot planted on the floor while his other leg hangs over the back of the piece of furniture, his back propped up against the armrest, his phone in hand. He looks... soft. Comfortable. Hannibal aches to join him.

Hannibal is across the room at his desk, and he does not feel soft or comfortable. Returning to his practice had been necessary, just as first stepping away had been, but he's grown accustomed to the intelligent conversation and easy companionship that comes with Will's presence – grating voices and everyday woes are more difficult to suffer through after his undiluted exposure to all that is *Will*.

Sighing, Hannibal sets his notes aside and turns his attention to the younger man. “Who?” he asks, and Will looks up from his phone, smiling gently.

“Francis Dolarhyde,” he repeats. “The Tooth Fairy. That's his name.”

There's no hesitation in his voice, no uncertainty. He's not proposing an identity for the killer; he's stating it. He's certain. And once again, Hannibal is suddenly, viscerally grateful that law enforcement couldn't manage to keep Will Graham to themselves.

“The FBI would pay handsomely for your ability to identify killers,” Hannibal says carefully, and Will's smile widens.

“I wish I could take all the credit this time,” he replies. Shifting, he reaches into the inside of his jacket and pulls out a folded piece of paper. “The FBI attributed Tier to you, you know. Publicly, at least.”

Hannibal huffs a breath of laughter. “They’re still patiently awaiting the rest of my ‘sounder.’ Well, less patiently now. Miss Lounds is starting to get suspicious, I believe. She wrote a rather scathing article suggesting Jack Crawford is covering up a copycat killer.”

If the Mimic was going to be seen here in Baltimore, it was going to be through the lens of the Ripper.

Will makes a face at being called a *copycat*, but it’s there and gone again in a moment. “She’s not the only one who suspects you weren’t the creator of that particular tableau,” he says. “It seems the Tooth Fairy is an avid fan of the Chesapeake Ripper. Really, Hannibal, you’re lucky I’m not the jealous type. I may have an easy time finding killers, but you truly *attract* them.”

There’s a twinkle in Will’s eye that belies his words, says he very well *is* the jealous type and Hannibal would do well to remember that, and Hannibal tucks that little mote of information away. “I assure you, it’s entirely unintentional.”

Will snorts his laughter. “We’ll say that makes it better. In any case, this guy is a different breed.” He taps the piece of paper. “This isn’t exactly fan mail.”

“He wrote you a letter?”

Will hums. “Left it at the diorama for me.”

Hannibal makes a low, disappointed sound. “Returning to the scene of the crime, Will? That’s rather pedestrian, isn’t it?”

“We all have our vices,” Will says airily. “I was careful. I always am.”

“What does it say?”

Will waves the letter, but he doesn’t open it. “You can read it yourself if you want the full effect of all the flowery, metaphorical language. He’s insulted on your behalf. I’m not sure who he sees as the god and who he sees as the supplicant in your relationship, but there’s definitely that implication. It’s... *passionate*.”

The distaste in Will’s voice is so heavy Hannibal nearly laughs. Nearly, because he finds it distasteful as well. He has no desire to be someone’s god; he has even less desire to kneel before one in supplication.

“You found him based solely on a letter?”

Will waves the piece of paper impatiently, and finally, Hannibal rises. He crosses the room to pluck the letter from Will’s hand, and Will, seemingly content to have it out of his grasp, sinks down farther into the couch cushions.

“He mentioned his transformation,” Will says. “It’s at the end. He says he’s becoming the Great Red Dragon.” He sighs, tipping his head back to look up at Hannibal. “I really am going to buy a lottery ticket this time,” he says, nonsensically, and Hannibal raises an eyebrow.

“Feeling lucky, are we?”

Will flashes him a grin. “William Blake did a series of paintings that depict the Great Red Dragon from the Book of Revelation. That’s what Dolarhyde is obsessed with *becoming* – this hellish beast from the end of the world.”

Will sits up, gathering in stray limbs before speaking again. “From what you told me about his crime scenes, and from what I read in his letter, he’s very... heavy-handed. Subtleties might be lost on him. He won’t truly be able to *become* while the original exists. He’d just be a shadow, a mockery, and he wouldn’t be able to stand that.”

Hannibal nods in understanding. “He’s going to destroy the painting.”

“Which just happens to be housed at the Baltimore Museum of Art,” Will says. “Luckily, I’m a fairly well-established reproduction artist. And I’ve worked with the BMA before.” Chuckling, Will shakes his head. “Dolarhyde has an appointment in a week and a half to do a private viewing of the first painting in the series, *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed in Sun*.”

Hannibal’s breath catches as the realization hits him. “You’re going to kill him.”

Will looks up, and then, slowly, he gets to his feet. Reaching up, he brushes the backs of his knuckles over Hannibal’s cheek, his blue eyes lingering on Hannibal’s own maroon-speckled hazel. For a moment, Will just looks at him, searching, and then, seeming to find whatever he’s looking for, he smiles.

“No, darlin’,” he says, ever so softly. “*We’re* going to kill him.”

Francis Dolarhyde.

The only significance the name holds is what Will has ascribed to it, though it runs a track in Hannibal’s mind throughout the entirety of the next day. He’s half-present in his sessions, if that – the rest of his attention is devoted to Will, and Francis, and the Great Red Dragon, and the tableau Will has planned.

Will hasn’t told him anything about the tableau, not in so many words, but with the veil of the Chesapeake Ripper gone and forgotten, the younger man is easier to read. His focus is honed on Dolarhyde’s idea of *becoming*, on his desire for complete transformation. Hannibal is fairly certain that Will has no desire to become the Great Red Dragon himself, but not all transformations have to be quite so literal.

His phone buzzes ten minutes before the end of his last appointment, and he resists the urge to check the message until he’s shown her out the back door.

- let me in when you're done.

Hannibal smiles involuntarily as he pockets his phone and goes over to the other door. When he opens it, it immediately reveals Will leaning up against the wall just outside, phone in hand, messy curls hanging down in front of his eyes. He looks up at the sound of the door opening, eyes glittering at the sight of Hannibal.

"You should throw a dinner party."

Hannibal blinks, his hand still on the doorknob. "Hello to you as well," he says, and Will ducks his head as the faintest traces of color stain his cheeks.

"Hi," he begins again, and then leans up, pressing a kiss to Hannibal's cheek. "You should, though."

Hannibal steps back to let Will into the office, and the younger man follows him inside. "Give me a moment to gather my things, and perhaps you can explain what led you to this conclusion?"

Will stuffs his hands in his pockets as Hannibal gathers his notes, organizing them into one stack. "I know you used to," he says. "You've mentioned them before. But you haven't since you picked me up."

"Correlation," Hannibal murmurs. "Not causation."

"Still," Will presses. "You should. I want to see you in your element. It's something you enjoy doing, isn't it?"

Hannibal looks up, his eyes narrowing slightly. "You're being rather insistent."

"I'm on a schedule."

"My dinner party needs to fit into your schedule, now, does it?"

Will smiles lazily, walking over to Hannibal's desk. "Our schedule, technically," he says. "Long or short explanation?"

Hannibal glances at his watch. "Short. You can regale me with the long one over dinner."

Will's smile widens. "I tipped the FBI off about Dolarhyde and I need to pick Jack's brain about what he finds out before our encounter with the Great Red Dragon himself."

"*Will...*"

"I was careful," Will assures him. "I always am."

Hannibal sighs, shouldering his bag. "You'll need to be careful with Jack."

"I know."

Hannibal resists the urge to sigh again. Instead, he guides Will over to the door. “We’ll need to procure meat,” he says, putting his hand on the doorknob.

Will nods. “I defer to your rolodex,” he says, flashing Hannibal a brilliant smile, and the older man returns the gesture in miniature before pushing the door open. “Oh,” Will adds. “And you should make the sanguinaccio dolce again. I mean, not *exactly* the same way you made it last time, but I think...”

He trails off, and when Hannibal looks up and follows his line of sight, he understands why. Standing in the lobby, looking almost frozen in place, is Freddie Lounds. Her face is pale as a sheet, her eyes wide and surprised and fixed firmly on Will.

“Miss Lounds,” Hannibal says tentatively, testing the waters to determine if the encounter is salvageable. She’s recognized Will’s voice, that’s obvious, but that’s hardly a science – if there’s any doubt, he may be able to capitalize on it, assure her that, no, what she heard wasn’t correct. “Miss Lounds, is everything all right?”

Freddie’s eyes flick to his, and all Hannibal sees in them is fear. Cold, bright, bottomless *terror*.

Fear, he knows, cannot be reasoned with. Terror cannot be tempered with rationality, cannot be laid to rest with a few soft words and gentle assurances. He looks over at Will, and he sees the same realization reflected on his face, the understanding that Freddie cannot be talked down from this ledge.

When they move, they move as one.

One of Hannibal’s hands slides over Freddie’s mouth while the other wraps around her throat. He puts his body behind hers, pinning her up against him while he cuts off her ability to scream and puts pressure on both carotid arteries. Before she can reach up to claw at him in panicked self-defense, Will grabs her wrists, pulling them in tight against his own chest.

As close as they all are, it’s impossible for Hannibal to miss the way Will leans down and puts his mouth by Freddie’s ear. “My apologies,” he murmurs, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “I know shock does terrible things to the body.”

Freddie’s eyes go wide as she jerks, one last attempt at freedom, and then her body sags against Hannibal’s, limp. A moment later, her eyes flutter shut, and a moment after that the muscles of her jaw relax against Hannibal’s hand. Only then does he release the pressure against her arteries, carefully lowering her to the floor.

For a moment, they both just look down at her unconscious form, but when Hannibal opens his mouth to speak, Will raises his hand. “Don’t,” he warns. “I know that look. That’s your *I transferred my passion for anatomy* look.”

Hannibal smiles genially. “I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re on about.”

Will’s eyes narrow.

“I’m merely noting this stroke of serendipity,” Hannibal continues. “Miss Lounds has been dying for an invitation to one of my dinner parties for years now.”

Will makes a soft, pained sound. “And you have the nerve to give me shit for returning to a crime scene,” he mutters, shaking his head. “All right. How are we going to do this?”

While Will disposes of Freddie’s car, Hannibal transports the reporter to their home. An injection of a proprietary mixture of benzodiazepines and barbiturates ensures she remains unconscious for the journey, and when Hannibal lifts her out of the trunk, she’s still entirely limp, dead weight in his arms.

By the time Will returns, however, she’s begun to stir.

Will comes down the stairs into what he’s dubbed Hannibal’s ‘murder basement,’ running a hand through his hair. His gaze immediately falls on Freddie, and Hannibal watches as he shifts, *slips*, not into the frame of mind of another killer, but a little deeper into himself, a little farther into the darkness he usually keeps under wraps. It’s beautiful to watch, and Hannibal finds himself eagerly anticipating the opportunity to see Will truly in his element.

He’s seen the aftermath of Will’s carnage, has seen his careful tableaux and his delicately crafted scenes, but now he wants to see the man with blood on his hands and victory in his eyes.

Freddie is at the center of the room. Her hands are bound above her head to a thick chain, raised just high enough to keep her toes off the ground. Normally, Hannibal would have strapped her down to the medical table in the corner – but Will requested sanguinaccio dolce. And, really, the most efficient way to bleed a bloody is with the use of gravity.

Will stops a few feet in front of Freddie, turning his head to glance at Hannibal. “She’s your kill,” he says, voice even, blue eyes bright. “I can just sit back and watch if you’d like.”

Hannibal smiles, and after a moment, the corner of Will’s mouth twitches upwards in response. “Miss Lounds is under the impression that you are the Chesapeake Ripper,” he says. “This is your last chance to correct that assumption.”

Hannibal expects Will to make a quip about Freddie’s perceptions not being his responsibility, but instead Will just nods slowly, turning his gaze back to the unconscious woman. “I suppose I could set the record straight,” he murmurs, cocking his head slightly. “Will she be enough for everyone?”

“I can supplement with a few selections from the freezer,” Hannibal assures him, but he’s cut off from explaining what, exactly, he plans on taking from Freddie Lounds when the woman shifts, her fingers flexing in their bonds.

With a soft, whimpering groan, Freddie eases back into consciousness. Her head bobs a few times, her eyelashes fluttering as she tries to get her bearings, and Will is right there to assist with two gentle fingers under her chin. He lifts her head until she blinks blearily, first at him and then, after a moment, over his shoulder at Hannibal.

“Doctor Lecter?” she slurs, but Will is the one to chuckle under his breath.

“Hey, now. Eyes on me, just for a little while. We didn’t get a chance for a proper hello earlier, did we?”

Even in her drug-addled state, it’s clear that Freddie recognizes Will’s voice. She jerks her head away, swinging slightly in the chains from the force of the motion. Will lets her pull away, raising his hands a little in a show of good faith..

Freddie looks between the two of them, her chest heaving as fight-or-flight makes her breaths ragged. “I don’t know who you are,” she tries, and Will just rolls his eyes, turning to look at Hannibal.

“I think the worst part of this,” he says, “is that they *know* you’re obsessed with Tattle-Crime.”

Hannibal sniffs delicately. “*Obsessed* is a rather strong word for it.”

“Obsessed,” Will repeats, but his smile shows teeth before he turns back to Freddie. Something between understanding and resignation has settled on her face during their exchange, and Hannibal sees her settle into her resolve.

“I thought you were the Ripper,” she says, looking up at Will. “Is it actually him?” Something sparkles in her eyes, excitement over an article she’ll never have the opportunity to pen. “Or are you... both?”

Will smiles down at her. “Identity is a tricky thing, Miss Lounds.” He pauses, cocking his head slightly. “Abel Gideon learned that the hard way, didn’t he?”

Freddie takes a shaky breath. “So it *was* you at the observatory.”

Will ducks his head in acknowledgement. “It was,” he says, “but I’m not the man you’ve been writing about. That identity belongs entirely to Hannibal.”

The look Freddie throws in Hannibal’s direction is hot and angry and accusatory, but she accurately characterizes Will as the immediate threat, and her gaze falls back on him. “You mimicked him well enough,” she says, and Hannibal nearly laughs aloud at the pleased look that spreads across Will’s face.

“Mimicry is a talent of mine.”

When he says nothing more, Freddie looks up at him, her eyes narrowed. For a second, she just searches his face, and Hannibal is privy to the exact moment she realizes what Will is insinuating, because shock makes her slack-jawed, makes the twitching pulse in her temple speed up by a few beats.

“There we are,” Will murmurs. “Little faster on the uptake this time around, aren’t we?”

“You-” Freddie begins, but Will raises a hand, cutting her off. He moves slowly, walking around to stand behind her, and when he speaks again, it’s with a steady hand on her hip

and his mouth by her ear.

“I find I don’t need to rely on *mimicry* when it comes to Hannibal, though,” he says quietly. Hannibal can barely hear him over the sound of Freddie’s breathing. Still, Will looks up, meeting his eyes over Freddie’s shoulder, a smile dancing over the corners of his lips. “Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same. And that’s what truly matters, isn’t it? Not the names and titles bestowed upon us by others.”

Something clenches in Hannibal’s chest, and his fingers curl instinctively around the handle of a nearby knife.

Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same.

Oh, Will.

Freddie sucks in a sharp breath. “Killing me is a mistake,” she spits, and it’s not a desire for negotiation in her voice, but *anger*. “They’re going to catch you. *Jack Crawford* is going to catch you.”

Will’s blue eyes flash, and a split second later, his hand is sunk in Freddie’s red curls, yanking her head back. Her body bows with tension, her legs kicking uselessly, but Will doesn’t snap her neck, doesn’t cut off her airway or slip his hands around her neck in a blood-choke. Instead, he leans back down, his lip pulled back in a snarl, and says, in a voice that’s barely above a growl, “Jack Crawford is going to enjoy your liver with some fava beans and a nice Chianti, and he’s going to thank us for the pleasure.”

He steps back, giving Freddie a half-shove, and looks up at Hannibal. There’s fire in his eyes, want blazing bright, and Hannibal knows, suddenly, exactly what it is that Will wants. He knows, because it’s what he wants himself.

Hannibal hasn’t seen Will in all his vicious glory – but Will hasn’t seen Hannibal in his, either.

He takes a half-second to mourn the loss of the suit he’s wearing, and then he strides forward, knife raised.

One clean slash severs both of Freddie Lounds’ carotid arteries, immediately drenching Hannibal’s shirt in her blood. It erupts from her throat in quickly weakening spurts, arterial spray splattering over his neck and cheek. She makes a desperate, choked-off gurgling sound once, her fingers fluttering like she wants to drag them down to her throat, and that’s it.

Freddie Lounds’ death is the complete antithesis of her life: private, unassuming, and *quiet*.

The thought is mildly amusing. Hannibal turns to share it with Will, but as soon as his eyes land on the other man he freezes in place. Will’s want has grown incandescent, blowing his pupils wide and ratcheting up the tension in his knees and jaw. He looks ready to pounce, to attack, and Hannibal realizes, belatedly, that the only thing holding Will back is the knife still in Hannibal’s hand.

Hannibal's fingers loosen their grip, and Will leaps forward before the knife even hits the ground. His body collides with Hannibal's, hard, propelling him backwards towards the wall, and Will kisses him at the same time, sharp, biting kisses that spread the taste of Freddie Lounds' blood over his tongue, bright and coppery and sweet.

"Will," Hannibal breathes, and Will makes a soft, whimpering sound against his mouth. His body is one hard line against Hannibal's, all hot, taught muscle under the layers of his clothes. Hannibal's fingers curl around the hard jut of Will's hips, digging in hard enough to bruise, and Will *bites* in retaliation, his teeth tugging at Hannibal's bottom lip.

"*Hannibal*," Will snarls against his mouth, his voice full of gravel. His hips rock against Hannibal's, a slow, sinuous roll, and Hannibal feels fingers slick with blood card through his hair a moment before they fist in the strands and pull his head back, baring the length of his throat.

The pain burns nearly as brightly as the pleasure, one hot line of sensation down his spine. He growls low in his throat as Will's mouth drags down the length of his neck, pausing to nip at skin pulled taught by the arch of his neck. "Hannibal," Will repeats, murmuring the word this time, pressing it directly into Hannibal's skin. "*Fuck*."

He licks a broad, hot stripe up the side of Hannibal's neck, flicking his tongue against the cut of Hannibal's jaw when he's finished, and it's that tease, that little bit of cheek, that snaps the last thread of Hannibal's patience. His own blood is running hot, his pulse thrumming hard and fast, and he can feel Will's arousal pressed up against his hip, just shy of his own.

He turns them, all but shoving Will up against the wall. The motion dislodges Will's hand from his hair and knocks a soft, breathy sound from Will's lips, but Hannibal doesn't stop to let him get his bearings. He gathers Will's wrists in one of his hands and drags them above his head, pinning them against the wall, and with his other he starts on the fastenings of their pants in rough, jerky motions.

Will squirms, trying to buck up into his touch, trying to drag his hands out of Hannibal's grip, and Hannibal tolerates it for a good five seconds before he jerks Will's hands down behind his head, forcing his arms to bend. He bares his teeth, the gesture too fierce to be a smile, too promising to be a snarl, and he sees understanding dawn in Will's eyes a moment before he leans forward and sinks his teeth into the corded muscle where Will's neck meets his shoulder.

The taste of blood in Hannibal's mouth isn't new, but it's fresh, and it's *Will's*. He bites down harder, relishing in the way Will's moans go broken, the way his body arches against Hannibal's, needy and desperate. Hannibal lets the taste of Will's blood coat his tongue, completely erasing Freddie Lounds', before he pulls away, licking his lips reflexively.

Blood immediately soaks into the collar of Will's shirt, not quickly enough to truly be worrisome, but enough that Hannibal knows he got his teeth down deep. He drags his tongue over his teeth, chasing the taste, and abruptly Will tugs at the grip he still has on his wrists, the movement hurried and desperate.

Hannibal releases his hands, but all Will does is grab fistfuls of Hannibal's shirt and drag him in closer to kiss him, to lick into his mouth and taste his own blood on Hannibal's tongue. He moans into Hannibal's mouth, and then his hands are moving between them, finishing the job of freeing them that Hannibal started.

Hannibal braces one hand against the wall, and he's halfway to wrapping the other hand around them both when he changes course. Instead, he brings his hand up to Will's neck, dragging his palm over the still-bleeding bite wound, pulling a sharp, keening whine of pain from the younger man as he spreads Will's blood over his hand.

Then he takes them in hand, and Will all but shakes apart against him. "Fuck," he hisses under his breath, and Hannibal feels the moment Will's knees give out, feels Will catch himself with arms thrown haphazardly around Hannibal's neck. He feels Will thrust up into his blood-slicked hand, rutting against Hannibal's own cock, hard and fast and *feral*.

You thirst for blood, and with blood I fill you.

He sets his mouth against the sluggishly bleeding bite, and Will jerks against him, gasping into the crook of his neck as Hannibal licks over the wound. Hannibal thinks of hellfire, of *becoming*, and he thinks of the healed-over marks from Will's own teeth in his neck and of blood-red gemstones, nearly black in the moonlight.

And then he thinks of nothing at all as he comes, spilling between them, hot and heavy. His grip tightens reflexively, the next few sharp, jerky movements of his hand just on the right side of painful, and that's enough to tip Will over the edge after him. Will comes with a sob, his hips stuttering up as he chases the aftershocks, and Hannibal strokes the both of them through it until Will is shivering, panting wetly against the crook of Hannibal's neck.

Hannibal allows his hand to fall away, then, but he doesn't move. Will is still clinging to him, still breathing heavily against his skin, and Hannibal has no desire to push him away. If anything, he wants to burrow closer, wants to tuck himself away in the warmth of Will's embrace and stay there, comfortably, for the foreseeable future.

He sighs softly. "You're quite distracting when you want to be," he murmurs, and Will laughs brokenly, the sound little more than a vibration against Hannibal's neck.

"Maybe you shouldn't look so fucking good covered in blood, then," he says, his voice thin and raspy. "Jesus, Hannibal."

Hannibal turns his head, pressing a soft kiss to Will's jaw. "There's a first-aid kit in the cabinet," he says, leaning back slightly. "We need to dress that wound."

Will huffs. "Don't pretend like you didn't enjoy putting it there."

Hannibal smiles, even though Will isn't looking up to see it. "I enjoyed it very much," he admits. "You, however, will not enjoy an infection." When Will wrinkles his nose, Hannibal leans in and kisses it, making him laugh again. "I'm afraid the particulars of your meal planning might have been lost on our dear Miss Lounds, earlier."

Will hums. “Were they lost on you?”

When Hannibal just smiles, Will cocks his head, something dancing behind his eyes. “It’s not quite up to the standards of your usual puns, I know.”

“I’m sure our guests will enjoy hearing about the particularly chatty lamb that gifted us her tongue,” Hannibal replies. “Now, the first-aid kit, Will.”

Will just stares up at him, lips slightly parted. “Particularly chatty lamb,” he repeats, just under his breath. “*Particularly chatty lamb*. Jesus fucking *Christ*.”

Will has played many roles in his life.

He has invited murderers into his mind long enough to see the world through their eyes, to leave his mark on it with their hands. He has shown every variation of himself, every possible iteration of *Will Graham*, from the twitchy, restless Louisiana cop to the experienced killer with blood on his teeth and fire in his eyes.

But he’s never been *the partner*.

That’s how Hannibal introduces him, when their guests start arriving. Jack takes it in stride, unsurprised – though he promises in a low, honest tone, not to talk shop at the dinner table.

Will lets himself smile in the way he’s been told is rather charming. “I knew what I was getting into when I agreed to this,” he says. “But I’m not above holding dessert hostage if things get out of hand.”

Jack laughs and claps Will on the shoulder. “I’ll make sure they stay in line.”

Alana Bloom flushes ever so slightly at the word, and Will’s teeth itch with a sudden harsh possessiveness. Her want is nearly palpable, and he’s not even trying, isn’t reaching out to draw her into him. It flares with every practiced movement Hannibal makes in the kitchen, every time his bare forearms flex with precise knifework, and it *burns* when he pours her a beer, his own special brew, made just for her.

She sees it as a sign of his affection.

Will, who has watched Hannibal clarify her beer with gelatin made from bone, knows better.

Beverly Katz eyes him critically for a moment before shaking his hand. Her grip is strong; the callouses on her hand speak of hours spent at the range. “Good to meet you in person,” she says.

It takes Will a moment, but he does put two and two together. “So I have *you* to thank for keeping that one from hopping behind the wheel with a concussion,” he says, and Beverly smiles. “I’d offer to buy you a drink, but.” He gestures around them vaguely and grins a little lopsidedly. “I owe you one.”

“Don’t think I won’t collect.”

Brian Zeller and Jimmy Price arrive together. Will's introduction earns him a blinding grin from Price, and a vigorous handshake, though he catches the briefest of grimaces from Zeller. Will's hackles are half-raised in defense before he realizes it's not disgust at the relationship that has the corners of the man's mouth turned down. And then he has to laugh softly, making sure to lower his voice before he speaks.

"*Partner* was a compromise," he says, and Zeller's eyes flick to him, intrigued. Will grins. "I think Hannibal would actually combust if he called someone his *boyfriend*, and I threatened violence if he used *lover* on this side of the Atlantic."

Zeller snorts his laughter, reaching up to cover his mouth with his hand, and Price just looks... *pleased*. "Thank god," Zeller says. "You're *normal*."

Rude, Will thinks, but he doesn't let his smile slip from his face. "I wouldn't go that far," he replies. "But I'm not quite as... eccentric, as Hannibal can be, sometimes."

"Eccentric isn't bad," Price interjects. "Eccentric is just *different*." He looks at Zeller pointedly, and the other man sighs.

"I know, I know." Zeller nudges Price's shoulder in what looks like a familiar, comfortable gesture, and both men relax a little.

Will smiles, motioning towards the kitchen. "Dinner's almost ready," he says. "Can I get you two something to drink?"

Dinner itself is a quiet affair. Jack is good on his word and keeps the conversation from getting too graphic, even though they do discuss cases – just not the Tooth Fairy. Will happily stays at the fringes of the conversation, falling into the role he played the last time Jack joined them for dinner: the retired cop who's *sensitive*.

It amuses Hannibal. Will can see it in his eyes, the faint glimmer of pleasure at seeing Will fool people who are supposed to be the best in their field.

It's not until after dessert that Jack begins to shift uncomfortably, a flash of guilt passing over his face. "I know we're here to socialize," he says, "but I was wondering if I could get your opinion on something, Doctor Lecter. Ah, privately."

Five pairs of eyes settle on Will, which tells him it's not exactly a private matter Jack wants Hannibal's opinion on. Still, he raises his hands in mock-surrender. "Hey, I get it," he says, smiling. "I have no problem being excluded when it comes to these things. Why don't you two take the study? Unless you need your team, Jack."

Jack lets out a breath, shaking his head. "No, that's fine. If it's all right with you, Doctor?"

Hannibal eyes Will for a moment, and then he ducks his head in acceptance, gesturing towards the study. "After you," he says, and both men retreat down the hallway.

Zeller barely waits for the door to close. “So,” he says. “You kind of know what we all do, but Lecter really hasn’t told us much about you.”

Will arches one eyebrow, and his eyes flick between the door to the study and Zeller pointedly. He looks at each of the others in turn – Price, Beverly, and Alana – before settling his gaze back on Zeller.

He knows Jack has told them about him. So while it’s not technically a lie, there’s no point in playing games.

“What’s the pot?” he asks, and Alana chokes on her beer.

Zeller doesn’t quite stiffen, but his gaze does go appraising as he looks Will over again, seeming to take him in for the first time. “Huh,” he says after a moment, nodding slightly. “All right. It’s two grand.”

Will makes a ‘hurry up’ gesture. “Someone’s owed money, then. Lay ‘em on me.”

“Hold on,” Beverly interrupts. “How did you *know*?”

Will grins. “Because, under the same circumstances, back in my NOPD days? We sure as hell would have had a pool.” He pauses. “You’re all profilers, yeah? I expect this to be interesting.”

“‘Interesting,’ he says.” Price shakes his head, laughing. “No high hopes for accuracy?”

Will feels his smile go sharp, and he spreads his hands a little and shrugs.

“Well, fuck you,” Zeller says, no heat in his voice. “All right. Let’s do this. Alana?”

“Oh.” Color floods Alana’s cheeks. “I don’t think...”

Zeller sighs. “She thinks you’re one of his former patients,” he says, and the pink blush in Alana’s cheeks goes scarlet. She hides behind her beer as Will looks in her direction, refusing to meet his eyes.

“I put my money on some sort of green card issue,” Zeller continues. “This whole sudden cohabitation thing just reeks of plausible deniability.”

Will bites the inside of his cheek to stop himself from laughing. “All right,” he says. “What else?”

“I’m not convinced you’re not mail-ordered,” Price pipes up. “Lecter’s kind of overdue for a mid-life. And it’s not like he can go get a *more* ostentatious car.” He frowns. “It’s a stretch, I’ll admit, but Brian’s right. You kind of just showed up. But I don’t know. You don’t exactly have an accent or anything-”

“*Je ne sais pas de quoi tu parles.*” Will’s French is accented – the South bleeds into his voice more readily, making the words deeper, richer, but it’s not a terribly obvious thing. In any

case, it's not his accent that makes Alana choke on her beer again and Price blink at him in shocked silence. This time, Will can't contain the chuckle.

"Louisiana, born'n raised," he says, letting his drawl slip into his English. His eyes flick over to Beverly. "You're up, I think."

Beverly looks at him for a long moment, her gaze assessing. "I don't think sugaring is exactly right," she says eventually. "But it's the closest I've got. And it's close, isn't it?"

Will bites back a smile and shakes his head, laughing softly. After a moment, he looks up, spreading his arms in defeat. "Give the woman her money, guys."

"*No fucking way*," Zeller cries. He looks at Will, as if he expects him to take it back, and when Will doesn't, he sags back in his seat. "No fucking way," he repeats.

"Not so much anymore," Will admits. "But at the start? Sure. Which makes her guess astronomically closer than any of yours."

"*Dude*."

"Shut up and pay up." Beverly nudges Zeller with one pointed toe, grinning. "Don't be a sore loser."

"Whatever."

Beverly looks over at Will as the other three pull out their wallets. She's still smiling, her mood towards Will much more favorable now that he's made her two grand richer. "Jack mentioned you were a cop too," she says. "Big change from that to a painter. Why'd you leave?"

Will considers the question for a moment, and then gestures around the room broadly. "Do you mind if I give it a go?"

Zeller looks up from where he's angrily counting bills. "What, the profiling?"

Will nods. "You all got to take your shots at me," he says. "Seems only fair to return the favor."

Beverly snorts her laughter. If she's thrown by the change in topic, she doesn't show it. "All right, yeah, NOPD. Go for it. Let's see what you've got."

Will turns to face her, letting a smile play out over his face. He doesn't *slip*, not quite, doesn't let the guise of Beverly Katz slide over him completely. Instead, he just... looks. Takes a peek into what makes her *her*.

"Beverly Katz," he says after a moment. "Oldest kid in your family. And you've got all the complexes that come with that. You're competitive. A perfectionist. It's not enough to be good at something – you're a CSI, but you spend more time at the range than most active agents do. You can't just be *good* with a gun. If you're going to handle a weapon, you're going to damn well handle it like it's an extension of your body." He pauses, licking his lips.

“But at the same time, you don’t mind bending the rules if you think they need to be bent. Not broken – you know which side of the law you stand on – but sliding over the line every once in a while never killed anyone, right?”

Will smiles as he turns, his voice softening a little. “Jimmy Price. You bounced around a lot before you landed at the BSU. You’re outstanding at your job, but interpersonal relationships just aren’t your forte. In your previous positions, that mattered. You had to put a lot of effort into masking, to the point where it was actually exhausting; but here, with these guys, you don’t. If you say something off-color, something that would be *weird* anywhere else, you don’t get looks and awkward silences in response, because, for once, the people around you actually understand how your head works.

“Alana Bloom.” Alana’s eyes go a little wide, and Will allows himself a little laugh. “Oh, I know. You’re terrified I’m going to bring up your little crush on Doctor Lecter – you have been the entire night, which means you’re all-too aware of how obvious it is.” He offers her a smile. “It’s all right. I’m not upset. If anything, it’s just an indicator of your good taste.” Alana flushes bright crimson, and Will chuckles again. “It bothers *you* though. You’re a consummate professional, in all aspects of your life. *You* don’t cross lines. You don’t *toe* lines. And it’s been long enough since you were his student that no one would be able to accuse either of you of misconduct, but the possibility irks you.” Will grins, licking his lips, and winks. “Almost as much as it turns you on.”

He doesn’t pause as he turns once more. “Brian Zeller. You’ve got Beverly matched for competitiveness. The pot was your idea, but at the same time, you don’t mind losing to her. You put in a lot of work to come across as an asshole, even to these three, but the truth is there’s very little you wouldn’t do for them.” Zeller winces, and Will *slips*, just a little. “*Oh*, feeling guilty, are we? Why’s that?”

Will cocks his head, and then reaches out, ignoring the faint flinch Zeller gives when Will’s hand brushes his jacket. When Will draws his hand back, there’s a single strand of hair pinched between two fingers, bright red and clearly curly.

“The guilt makes sense now,” he says, eyes flicking up to meet Zeller’s. “I’d have a heavy conscience too if I was sleeping with Freddie Lounds.”

Will lets the hair fall from his fingers and takes a sip of his wine as silence echoes around them. “So,” he asks after a beat. “How’d I do?”

“*Jesus*,” Zeller hisses. “What the *fuck*, dude?”

Beverly spins in her seat. “Wait, is he right? Are you fucking Lounds?”

“That is *not* the topic at hand,” Zeller mutters. He points a finger at Will. “You – how?”

Will shrugs one shoulder. “Beverly asked why I quit being a cop,” he says. “That’s why.” He gestures vaguely at his own head, grimacing a little. “I can’t turn it off. It’s constant. Coworkers, suspects, it doesn’t matter. It’s a nonstop movie of motives playing out in my head.”

Price makes a pained noise. “*That* sounds exhausting.”

“It sounds useful,” Beverly counters, and then pauses, considering. “But also like it could drive you really crazy really quick.”

“I take it back,” Zeller says suddenly. Will quirks an eyebrow, and he elaborates. “You. You’re definitely *not* normal. You and Lecter are exactly the same brand of *weird*.”

Will smiles, showing teeth. “Generally people have to share some similarities to work out well together,” he admits. He takes the opportunity to glance over his shoulder at the study door, and then down at his watch. “I didn’t get to detail my profile on Jack, but *obsessive* would have been one of the words I used. Is... everything okay?” He pauses. “Can I ask that? I know you’re all in the middle of an active investigation...”

Zeller scoffs. “Like you’re not going to get all the dirty details from Lecter later, anyway,” he says, and then sighs, scrubbing a hand over his face. He looks over at Price, and then at Beverly, and then at Alana. And then, almost like the words have to be dragged out of him, he says, “His perspective could actually be helpful.”

“We don’t have to tell Jack,” Beverly says quickly, not so much toeing the line as leaping over it. “We’re just... chatting. Bouncing ideas. And like you said – it’s not like Will’s not going to hear it all later anyway. We might as well see what he has to say.”

“Fuck it.” Zeller throws back the rest of his wine in a gesture crass enough to make Will wince before setting the glass down on the table. “So,” he says, rubbing his palms together. “What’s Lecter told you about the Tooth Fairy?”

Chapter End Notes

(Price and Zeller remind me of Aziraphale and Crowley for some godforsaken reason, and whenever I write/read them I have that image in my head, so now you get to have it too. you’re welcome.)

every time someone in the show asks what they’re about to eat it just makes me laugh. I grew up spending a lot of time in rural Italy, where it’s a lot more common to consume cuts and organs that aren’t really seen in the US, and I learned REAL QUICK not to ask what I was eating, ‘cause chances were I wasn’t going to like the answer, and it was just better not to know that the meat in my delicious pasta sauce was tongue. and I just know if I was ever (un?)fortunate enough to sit at Hannibal’s table, I’d end up saying something like “No, it’s okay, I really don’t want to know what this is” and lowkey implying I KNEW what I was being fed and because I don’t have cute puppy dog eyes and my brain isn’t on fire, that’s how I would die. (And Hannibal wouldn’t get to be punny, so he’d be extra pissed).

in other news, I officially have too many Hannigram ideas. ignoring Summer of Whump, which is going to be 30 one-shots, I have 5 stand-alone fics with a total of 45

chapters of content planned out. (I have no tumblr to direct y'all to, so check the comments for some vague descriptions – I have to build the hype somehow!)

also (last thing, promise) the tags have been updated to reflect the last two unposted chapters. minor spoilers, but y'all knew it was coming anyway ;)

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

“In any case,” Will continues, “this feels more like an ascension than a fall.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

As a rule, people do not put themselves into Hannibal’s personal space.

There are exceptions. Franklyn, before his unfortunate demise, constantly tried to put himself closer to Hannibal in a misguided attempt at strengthening their relationship. And Alana will, on occasion, drift into his orbit, allowing herself to touch his arms, his wrists, his shoulders, a mixture of hesitation and desire coloring every careful movement.

Will, of course, is the biggest exception of them all.

He knows the monster that lurks under Hannibal’s carefully crafted person-suit intimately, and yet he’s the one who presses in closest, who touches the most, who makes himself comfortable in Hannibal’s space like he belongs there. He sleeps next to Hannibal, kisses him without hesitation, and clings to him whenever he’s presented with the opportunity.

He’s draped over Hannibal now. They’re on the sofa in the study, each with a glass of scotch, and Will has his back against the armrest and his legs thrown over Hannibal’s lap. It’s comfortable, *casual*, in a way none of Hannibal’s previous paramours ever quite arrived at.

Hannibal’s glass is resting on one of Will’s knees, and his other hand is curled gently over the younger man’s thigh, and it’s also comfortable and casual in a way he’s never really allowed himself to be with anyone else. The veil drops, and the suit falls away, but Hannibal feels no need to bare his teeth or show his claws.

And he knows they would not frighten Will, even if he did.

Will shifts, stretching a little, though he’s careful not to move enough to dislodge either of Hannibal’s hands. “You ready?” he asks, his voice is soft and sure.

In a little under twenty-four hours, they’ll confront Francis Dolarhyde at the Baltimore Museum of Art. They’ve planned as much as they can, discussing the details they gathered from Jack and his team: specifically, Dolarhyde’s military history and his penchant for firearms.

Hannibal sighs, his fingers pressing a little more firmly into the soft give of Will’s thigh. Under his fingertips, the younger man’s pulse is strong and steady, a testament to *his*

readiness, his certainty. And Hannibal is prepared, is ready as well in his own right. Dolarhyde may be a grade above his usual quarry, but Hannibal does not doubt their ability to kill him.

Still... “Guns are rather impersonal,” he says, and Will rolls his eyes, a gesture that’s entirely fond and exasperated at the same time.

“They are,” Will agrees. “But they’re also his MO. I’m not showing up under-armed for the sake of *aesthetics*.”

Hannibal feels his mouth curl into an expression of distaste – it’s far more than aesthetic preferences that drive his dislike for firearms – but before he can speak Will’s eyes soften and his free hand reaches out, sliding over Hannibal’s on his thigh.

“I never expected,” Will begins, and then stops, frowning down at the glass in his hand. He shakes his head and tries again. “I used to think that...” But that sentence trails off too as Will’s mind attempts to put the conclusions of all his quick associations into words.

Hannibal waits patiently, his eyes lingering on Will. They are in no hurry, and he knows that whatever it is that Will wants to tell him will be worth waiting for.

After a few moments, Will sighs. He squeezes Hannibal’s hand, and then shifts to look up at him, blue eyes shining. His expression is open and raw, and Hannibal’s entire world narrows to just whiskey and warmth and Will Graham.

“I let you know me, see me,” Will says, and Hannibal’s chest squeezes around his heart. “And you did the same. I know you understand what a rare gift that is, Hannibal.”

Hannibal nods tightly, and Will smiles. “Dolarhyde sees himself as a god, but I have no intention of allowing him to act like one. He will not have the pleasure of killing you. If the cost of ensuring that is *inelegance*, that’s a price I’m willing to pay.”

He squeezes Hannibal’s hand again, and this time Hannibal turns his hand up, pressing their palms together. *My darling*, he thinks. *Beloved*. *My limasis*. All of it is on the tip of his tongue for a brief moment, almost spilling from his lips in one ardent confession.

“We should get some rest,” Will says, and Hannibal swallows the words down.

They can wait until after they’ve killed their false god.

They wait in the basement of the Baltimore Museum of Art, hidden and silent.

Hannibal cannot see Will, but he knows he is there, hidden among the shelves, watching the elevator doors just the same as Hannibal. They are two hunters, matched in every way, waiting for their prey.

The doors open, and Hannibal makes sure he is hidden as Dolarhyde and one of the museum’s curator’s emerge. He watches her retrieve the painting, Blake’s *The Great Red*

Dragon and the Woman Clothed in Sun, watches as she lays it out, watches as Dolarhyde dispatches her with one perfunctory blow to the back of the head.

And then, as Dolarhyde returns to examine the painting, Hannibal makes himself known.

“Francis,” he says, stepping out from behind the shelf providing his cover, and before he’s even finished speaking there’s a gun leveled at his face. He blinks at it, bemused, before turning his gaze on the man holding it. “Apologies,” he continues. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Who are you?”

Dolarhyde’s voice is a rough, raspy thing, and his eyes, fixed firmly on Hannibal, are dark and bottomless. There is not an ounce of compassion in them, not a scrap of humanity – Dolarhyde is not hiding behind a veil. His beast, his *darkness*, is in full view.

Hannibal clears his throat. “You already know the answer to that question,” he says, refusing to allow himself to flinch as Dolarhyde’s finger twitches closer to the trigger. “You left a... colleague of ours a very interesting letter about me at his last crime scene.”

Something passes over Dolarhyde’s face, a shadow of an emotion other than suspicious anger. The barrel of the gun lowers infinitesimally, and Hannibal presses a little farther. “You mentioned your becoming,” he says, and then nods at the painting. “Is that what this is?”

Dolarhyde shudders, and, finally, the gun drops to his side. “I knew you would understand,” he murmurs, so quietly Hannibal almost doesn’t hear him. He shifts, tucking the gun away somewhere under his coat, and then he raises his eyes back to Hannibal’s. They’re shining now, still bottomless, but bottomless like the sea is – tumultuous and dangerous. “I – I have admired you for years,” he continues, his voice an eager rasp. “I have a complete collection of your press notices.” His expression twists into something unpleasant. “Your unfair reviews.”

Hannibal takes a step closer, keeping his breaths even and his eyes on the other man. “Are they as unfair as yours?” he asks. “They do like to sling demeaning nicknames, don’t they?”

Dolarhyde grimaces, turning his head away. “Tooth Fairy,” he mutters. At his sides, his hands curl into fists.

Hannibal takes another step closer, pitches his voice to be soothing. “What could be more inappropriate?”

With another full-body shudder, Dolarhyde looks up. There is a rawness in his expression that Hannibal finds almost obscene, an intimacy that Hannibal has no desire to share in. Dolarhyde is showing himself, the version of himself that’s about to become, but Hannibal doesn’t see a monster. He does not see a *dragon*.

Francis Dolarhyde, he thinks, *will taste the same as every other long pig*.

“It would shame me for you to see that,” Dolarhyde says shakily, “if I didn’t know that you had suffered the same distortions in the press.”

Hannibal resists the urge to purse his lips. “You do not want me to see you as everyone else does?”

Dolarhyde snarls, one hand coming up to grip the side of the table. “I want to be *recognized* by you.”

Ah, Hannibal thinks, and understanding clicks into place. He takes another step forward, and when Dolarhyde does nothing more than look at him and breathe, he continues, moving forward until he’s put the table between them and he’s standing across from the other man.

“You want to be recognized,” he says, gently. “As John the Baptist recognized the one who came after?”

And, finally, something alights behind Dolarhyde’s eyes. He leans forward across the table, hands spread on either side of the Blake painting, and he *growls*, low in his throat. “I want to sit before you as the Dragon sat before 666 in Revelation,” he says. “I have... things I would love to show you.”

Hannibal swallows back his distaste and feigns interest. Behind Dolarhyde, he sees a brief flicker of movement, a flash of brown curls, but he forces himself to keep his eyes on the man in front of him. “Such as?”

Dolarhyde laughs, a low, gravelly thing. “Someday, if circumstances permit, I would like to watch you... *meld* with the strength of the Dragon.”

Will, when he strikes, strikes *quickly*.

The knife in his hand sinks into Dolarhyde’s cheek up to the hilt, and as the man gasps in surprise, blood sprays out of his mouth, bathing both Hannibal and the painting in crimson droplets. Will jerks the knife forward, severing skin and thin muscle in one sharp motion, until the knife slides free of Dolarhyde’s face through his mouth.

The man’s shock only lasts for that moment. With a furious snarl, Dolarhyde throws himself back, pinning Will between his body and the nearest shelf. Hannibal hears the impact, hears Will’s muffled groan of pain, and then he’s vaulting over the table, his own knife in hand.

Dolarhyde meets him with a kick that sends him staggering back against the table, but before he can advance, Will’s knife stabs into his thigh, his side, and his shoulder all in quick succession. He *snarls* and spins to face Will, already reaching into his coat for his gun, and Hannibal lunges forward once more to bury his own blade in the meat of Dolarhyde’s shoulder.

The man cries out, harsh and guttural, and Hannibal reaches around blindly, fingers clawing at the bloody flaps of skin that used to be Dolarhyde’s cheek. He grabs and *pulls*, yanking the man’s head back as he drags the knife out of his shoulder, intending to slit his throat and finish this.

Will beats him to it.

The younger man drags himself up and sets his teeth against Dolarhyde's bared neck, and without hesitation he bites down, hard. Hannibal hears the click of his teeth meeting inside the man's neck, and then Will throws his head back, taking with it a chunk of Dolarhyde's trachea.

Blood sprays out over his face, and Will *smiles*, sharp and feral and beautiful.

When Hannibal steps back, Dolarhyde falls to his knees between them. He makes one aborted clutch at his throat as his eyes go wide with the realization of what's happened, and then, as if someone cut the strings holding him up, he collapses into a heap of blood and limbs.

For a moment, the only sound is Hannibal and Will's breathing, almost excruciatingly loud in the sudden silence. Then Will turns his head to the side and spits out his mouthful of flesh and cartilage, his expression going distasteful.

"There were better places you could have chosen to inflict the initial wound," Hannibal observes, and Will turns to face him, baring bloody teeth at him.

"I'm aware it was petty," he says. "I may have lost a little perspective when he said he wanted to *meld* with you."

A little of the lingering tension in Hannibal's shoulders eases away. "Will," he begins, and Will winces, looking away.

"I know. Your kills are usually cleaner."

Hannibal reaches out, turning Will's face back towards him with gentle fingers. Will's skin is slick with blood, warm to the touch, and Hannibal suddenly doesn't want to stop touching. "Will," he says again. "You were *beautiful*."

He feels the breath Will takes, long and thin and shaky, and he's rewarded with another bloody smile and a small, quiet little laugh. "You might be biased."

"I'm also correct."

Will shakes his head, but the smile stays in place. "Where's the bag?" he asks, and Hannibal steps around the body to retrieve the duffel bag they set aside earlier. Will nods when he sees it, and Hannibal sees him slip, not into the mind of another killer, but further into himself, deeper into the darkness he usually keeps hidden.

"You should harvest what you want," Will says. "I'll get started on the rest."

The rest. Hannibal does not know the entirety of what that implies. Will has been elusive about his design for Dolarhyde, only cluing Hannibal in on the supplies he needed, the tools that would be necessary, and not the design of the tableau itself.

Hannibal does not mind. He knows he will see Will's piece when it comes together. Foreknowledge of it is not necessary.

He retrieves his tools from the bag – scalpel, cooler, and rib retractor – and settles down next to Dolarhyde's body to begin work. The heart is not an easily accessible organ, and while normally he would simply break and discard the ribs, Will wants the body as intact as possible.

He works as quickly as he can, cutting open Dolarhyde's chest and carefully spreading the third and fourth ribs. The last two cranks of the retractor do cause them to crack, but that creates just enough space for Hannibal to sink his hands into the man's chest and, with a precision that can only come with practice, sever the heart from the aorta, veins, and arteries it is attached to. The scalpel slides neatly through the delicate tissue, and not long after Hannibal is able to gently slide the heart free of the rib cage.

He places the organ on ice in the cooler, removes the retractor, and turns to see what Will has created.

There is a harness against the wall, or the skeleton of one. Hannibal sees three loops of rope that draw together to a pulley. The single rope that comes out of the pulley goes up to the ceiling, where it's draped over a large silver hook. Hannibal is fairly certain the hook wasn't there when they arrived; he's also fairly certain Will didn't drill a hole into the concrete to anchor it there.

He raises an eyebrow, and Will grins at him. His face is still bloody, and his eyes are sparkling, and Hannibal, suddenly, wants to do nothing more than kiss him. He swallows and focuses. They'll have time for that later.

"Cyanoacrylate glue," Will says. "Thirty-second cure time. Help me drag him?"

Will lowers the ropes to the ground, and together they drag Dolarhyde's body over to the wall. Two of the loops of rope go over his arms, sitting snugly under his armpits, and the third Will fastens around his neck, drawing it tight so that it forces his head to stay upright, displaying the mangled mess of his throat.

Together, they haul the body upright, and when Francis is more-or-less standing against the wall, Will ties the rope off against one of the shelves. For a moment, he considers the image before him, and then he nods, almost to himself.

"All right," he says quietly. "Great Red Dragon."

Hannibal steps back and watches as Will delves back into the duffel bag, emerging this time with a paintbrush. It's large, more like one a contractor would use to paint trim than an artist would use on a reproduction, but Will still handles it delicately as he approaches Dolarhyde's body. He looks the man up and down again, taking in the cant of his limbs and mess of his clothing, and then, very slowly, he smiles to himself.

Then Will dips the brush into the hole he tore in the man's throat, and, with broad, sweeping strokes that leave swaths of crimson on the gray concrete, he gives Francis Dolarhyde wings.

Hannibal watches with an uncharacteristic tightness in his throat as Will paints. He understands, he thinks, why Will kept his design a secret, why he didn't tell Hannibal he planned to facilitate Dolarhyde's becoming, even after his death.

Watching it take place is... breathtaking.

When Will finishes the wings, dragging the tips of them all the way down to the floor, Hannibal expects him to step away. But instead, Will looks around until he spots a stepstool, and then drags in closer so that he can reach the wall above Dolarhyde's head.

He starts painting again, and it takes Hannibal a moment to recognize what he's writing.

And then, suddenly, he does, and Hannibal's breath catches in his throat. It's not quite... correct, but with a single word changed, the rest of the verse is still easily recognizable. He can hear the beginning of it in his memory, the echo of his own voice in his foyer. *Love seized me so strongly through his charm that, as you can see, it has not yet abandoned me.*

Oh, Will.

"Dante," he murmurs, and Will looks up sharply, blue eyes flashing.

"Adjusted, slightly," Will says, hopping down off the stepstool.

And it really is only slightly. *Love ushered the two of us into one death*, Hannibal thinks.

The beginning of the next verse. It's almost exactly what Will has written in blood above Dolarhyde's head. Almost.

Nine words. Hannibal takes a breath.

"Love ushered the two of us into one life."

Will closes his eyes, his breath leaving him in a slow, shaky exhale. "I know it's not accurate," he says. "But this isn't our ending. It's our beginning."

"Will," Hannibal begins, and he's surprised at the sound of his own voice. It's rough, ragged – he sounds like he's been crying, like his vocal cords have been dragged over gravel.

Like he's suddenly been presented with everything he never knew he wanted, and his body is unsure of how to respond.

Will's smile is a slow, tremulous thing. "I know," he says. "We're almost done."

He turns to the table and picks up the painting, his eyes darting over the bloodstains marring it. "I was actually pretty proud of this one," he says with a soft, half-regretful laugh. "I guess it served its purpose though."

He slips the reproduction painting into the duffel bag, and then steps around the shelf to retrieve the real one, tucked safely away when they arrived. He looks up as he places it carefully beneath the plastic, meeting Hannibal's eyes across the room.

“It’s *priceless*,” Will says under his breath. “I wasn’t going to let him *destroy* it.”

Hannibal raises his hands in mock-surrender, ducking his head. “I didn’t say anything.”

Will huffs, replacing the plastic over the painting. And then he ducks into the duffel bag once more, emerging with a piece of paper held in his hand. He looks down at it, hesitating for a moment, before setting it on the table next to the painting.

“Will?” Hannibal asks softly, and Will taps the piece of paper.

Taking the cue, Hannibal walks up to the table. He looks down and sees Will’s handwriting first, and sees a list of names second. And then, after a moment, he recognizes some of the names.

Cassie Boyle. Cecelia Danlos. Paul Carruthers. Randall Tier.

The other names he doesn’t recognize, but he can draw conclusions from the ones he does. It’s a list of Will’s victims.

No, he thinks after a moment. *No. A list of the Mimic’s victims.*

He looks up at the body of Francis Dolarhyde, brought into his becoming, and thinks of what Will told him.

A tableau is worth a thousand words.

The scene before him isn’t imitation, isn’t *mimicry*. Everything, death and design and tableau, is *Will*. There is no other killer sitting in his head, guiding his motions, influencing his decisions.

And, finally, Hannibal understands what Will meant by *last*.

“I thought it wasn’t your duty to correct how others perceive things.”

Will hums, but he doesn’t agree or disagree aloud. Instead, he looks up at Dolarhyde’s body, brought into his own by the hands that took his life, and at the note resting next to Blake’s painting. “I’m not,” he says eventually. “I’m just... shedding light on the subject.”

Hannibal swallows, feeling suddenly as though he’s the one splayed out, put on display, even though Will isn’t even looking at him. “Is that what you are now?” he asks, forcing steadiness into his voice. “A bringer of light?”

Will chuckles under his breath, reaching up to brush a thumb over his bloody bottom lip. Then he turns, blue eyes glittering as they land on Hannibal, deep and open and so very familiar.

“Morningstar is a mouthful, isn’t it?” Will asks, and the words sink into Hannibal’s chest, wrapping themselves around his heart and *squeezing*. Will smiles, and Hannibal feels the weight of his empathy like an embrace.

I let you know me, see me.

No one has understood Will as well as Hannibal does. And no one has ever *known* Hannibal as intimately as Will does.

“In any case,” Will continues, “this feels more like an ascension than a fall.”

Hannibal takes a breath, trying, in some way, to get his sense of balance back. “An evolution?” he asks, and Will smiles again, bloody teeth on full display.

“A *becoming*.”

Chapter End Notes

Mads did an interview where he talked about how when he played Hannibal, he imagined how it was to be Satan. I kind of took that metaphor and ran with it as the reason why no one can really get on his level. an angel is a being beyond understanding; a fallen angel like Lucifer would be so far beyond comprehension as to almost be laughable.

Will, for all he was granted the gift of *knowing* Hannibal, had to undergo his own transformation in order to earn the right to sit beside him in hell. in canon, that meant choosing to fall from grace and abandoning the whole part-time Persephone schtick he had going with Hannibal and Jack. here, his transformation wasn't nearly as dramatic, because he already fell when he became the Mimic, but it was still necessary for him to *move on* from that part of himself in order to fully ascend to the throne, as it were.

TL;DR Bryan, Mads, and Hugh are all geniuses, the show was pure poetry in motion, and I hope y'all have enjoyed my little Dante-infused take on it.

one more chapter to go. thanks for sticking with me, everyone :)

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Blue eyes meet blood-flecked amber, and Will does not flinch away from him, not from his display of emotion or his display of *himself*.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They return home together with Dolarhyde's heart, and the thought does not occur to Hannibal until they're together in the kitchen, Will perched on a stool at his usual place at the counter and Hannibal with a knife in one hand and the heart in the other.

I let you know me, see me. I know you understand what a rare gift that is.

He thinks of Will baring himself with his design, making himself open and honest and *raw* for Hannibal's gaze. His rare gift. And as he slips the blade into the meat of the heart, Hannibal thinks that a gift like that deserves reciprocation.

"You asked me, once, who I was before this." Hannibal's voice is steady, if only by force of will, and he knows the words get Will's attention because he can feel the weight of his gaze, heavy and pointed.

Will makes a soft sound of affirmation. "You told me about John Hopkins." He pauses. "Are we going back before that?"

Hannibal presses his lips together and nods tightly and thinks *whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same*.

"Her name was Mischa," he says, and his voice is a rough, quiet thing. He keeps his eyes on the heart, keeps his focus on the careful, practiced movements of the knife in his hands, but he doesn't miss the way Will turns his body towards him, *can't* miss the way the atmosphere in the room shifts.

"She was my sister."

Will doesn't make a sound as he slides off the stool, but before Hannibal can question the movement, before he can start to wonder where Will is going, the other man has already come around the curve of the counter into the kitchen. Without a word, he presses himself up against Hannibal's back, his arms sliding comfortably around the older man's waist, his chin coming to rest gently on one of Hannibal's shoulders. Hannibal feels the briefest press of lips against the side of his neck before Will settles against him, warm and solid and comforting.

“You loved her,” Will murmurs, and Hannibal lets out a long, shaky breath.

“Unequivocally,” Hannibal answers, and he feels the way Will’s arms tighten around him for just a moment, an involuntary response to the word. It settles him more than it should.

Will presses his mouth against Hannibal’s shoulder, more of a nuzzle than a kiss, and sighs softly. “You didn’t kill her.”

The hand holding the knife trembles ever so slightly as Hannibal shakes his head, and Will presses closer, his hands sliding up the plane of Hannibal’s chest until he can hook his fingers over the rise of Hannibal’s collarbones. Will is strong, and he uses that strength, holding Hannibal tightly against himself.

He’s pinned. *Trapped*. And Hannibal knows, somehow, what Will is going to ask him before he even takes the breath to speak the words.

“How did your sister taste, Hannibal?”

Will’s voice is soft, gentle, free of accusation or anger or disgust, and more than anything else, it’s that unflinching, unwavering acceptance that causes Hannibal’s vision to go blurry. Setting the knife aside, he presses his palms flat against the countertop and ducks his head, closing his eyes against the hot swell of emotion that rises inside him.

“Like spring,” Hannibal says quietly, as if murmuring the words will disguise their weight. “She tasted like spring.”

Will does not let him hide behind quiet words and closed eyes, however.

His arms drop from Hannibal’s chest, but Hannibal only has a second to mourn the loss before Will is gently guiding his hips back, putting just enough space between Hannibal and the counter for Will to slip into. And that’s exactly what he does, slipping into the space and drawing Hannibal back in against him until they’re chest-to-chest, so that when the tears do finally fall from Hannibal’s eyes, it’s Will’s bloodstained shirt they land on.

After a moment, Hannibal feels Will’s fingertips on his chin, gently urging him to lift his head. He resists for all of half a breath, and then allows Will to move him, to lift his head up slowly. Hannibal knows what he looks like – he can feel the tear tracks drying on his face, and he knows that his eyes, while red-rimmed and watery, are also *open*. He can feel it, the lifted veil, the complete absence of his person-suit.

Blue eyes meet blood-flecked amber, and Will does not flinch away from him, not from his display of emotion or his display of *himself*. Instead, his hands come up to gently cup Hannibal’s cheeks, his thumbs brushing away the wetness under Hannibal’s eyes. For a moment, Will just looks at him, his expression placid, serene. And then, slowly, he leans up.

He presses the first kiss to Hannibal’s forehead, and Hannibal trembles bodily at the touch of his lips, pushing his hands harder into the edge of the counter. Will hushes him softly, no more than a breath against his skin, and then ducks his head, pressing a kiss against the rise

of each defined cheekbone. The last kiss is brushed over Hannibal's mouth, soft and sweet, and somehow entirely consuming.

Will meets his eyes again, a small, fond smile playing out over his lips. "Beautiful," he says softly, and the gentle reverence in his voice sends Hannibal's mind back to that first night in the Bentley, parked in the driveway, with Will's fingernails drawing blood from the back of his neck.

Oh, that's beautiful.

Hannibal shivers, and Will's smile widens just a little. "Beautiful," he repeats. "God, I love you."

It's not anything Hannibal didn't already know. The sentiment has been passed between them in every quote and kiss and caress, alluded to even if it was never laid bare. Will's love was evident in the words he painted above Francis Dolarhyde's head, in the careful display of Randall Tier's body, in the gift Will gave of himself. If Hannibal cares to think about it, it was evident even before that, obvious from the moment Will stood in the doorway to his bedroom and gritted out *I want everything* with Tobias Budge clawing at the edges of his mind.

Hearing it, as it turns out, is much different than knowing it.

"Will."

Hannibal's voice is a rough, broken thing, and, pressed together like they are, he can feel the way it pierces Will, the way hearing it affects *him*. He feels the shiver that rips through Will's slender frame, all the way from his toes to the fingertips that are still pressed to Hannibal's face, and he feels the rough breath that Will lets out, almost as if it's torn from him.

The second kiss isn't soft or sweet, but it's still consuming, drawing the entirety of Hannibal's attention to the hard drag of Will's lips and the press of his fingers. Will kisses him like he's trying to press a piece of himself into Hannibal; it would feel desperate if it didn't feel so right.

When Will pulls back, his lips just starting to look kiss-swollen and red, Hannibal tries again. "Will—"

"I know," Will interrupts, his thumb tracing the edge of Hannibal's cheekbone. His eyes flick up, meeting Hannibal's, and he smiles. "I know."

He presses another kiss to the corner of Hannibal's mouth, quick and soft, and then leans back with a sigh. "I am a forensic wet dream right now," he says, looking down at the blood staining his shirt. "I'm going to go clean up. You all right to finish here?"

Hannibal nods, and Will, with what Hannibal can only call reluctance, steps out of Hannibal's space. His fingertips drag along Hannibal's arm for a moment as he turns away, and the ghost of his touch lingers even after he's disappeared down the hallway.

Hannibal turns his focus back to the heart, and he purposefully does not think of Will washing blood off his skin.

By the time Will returns, his clothes clean and his curls still slightly damp, Hannibal is putting the finishing touches on the food. Will glances at the platter he's filled, and then at Hannibal, his expression a mix between curiosity and eager anticipation.

"Is that what I think it is?"

"Go sit down," Hannibal tells him, and Will grins, raising his hands before backing away from the counter. He obeys, making his way out to the dining room, and after a moment Hannibal takes the platter and follows him.

Will is not sitting, but he is pouring the wine Hannibal decanted to let breathe, and he smiles without looking up when Hannibal sets the platter down. "I've accepted my role at your table," he says, lifting the decanter in indication.

And Hannibal, serving spoon in hand, corrects him before he can think of a reason not to. "I believe it became 'our' table when you hosted a dinner party with me."

Will pauses mid-motion, halfway into putting the decanter down, and turns his gaze on Hannibal. For a moment, they just look at each other, and then Will nods slightly, almost to himself.

"All right," he says easily, and sets the decanter down. "Now do I get to know what you're feeding me?"

He sits, and Hannibal explains. "Every dish benefits from fresh ingredients," he says. "With tartare, however, *fresh* is a necessity."

There are a dozen or so golden-brown tarts sitting on the platter, each of them filled with a portion of finely-chopped heart. The seasonings are simple, and purposefully so – the cut and quality of the meat is the focus of the dish, and without any cooking, there is only so much that can be done to enhance the flavor without risking overwhelming it.

Hannibal serves them both before taking his seat, and Will offers him a smile across the table. "It doesn't get much fresher than this," he says, and then picks up one of the tarts with his thumb and forefinger. Hannibal watches as he raises it to his lips, pauses, and then sinks his teeth into it to take a bite.

Hannibal does not think he will ever tire of the way Will's expression goes softly blissful when he tastes something Hannibal has created for him, the way he savors the first bite as if it's the only one he'll get. It's always a pleasure to see someone enjoy his food; Will makes it truly a joy.

Will licks his lips and swallows his mouthful, a smile teasing at the corners of his mouth. "The heart of a dragon," he murmurs. "You're really broadening my horizons."

Hannibal feels himself smile in return, the sharp points of his canines peeking through.

“Eat your dinner, Will.”

They do the dishes together, afterward, side by side, Hannibal washing and Will drying. It's not something many would consider a privilege, but it's also not something Hannibal has allowed many to do. His kitchen is... his.

Theirs, now, he supposes. The thought is far more pleasing than he ever thought it would be.

When the last dish is put away, Will takes him by the hand and leads him to the bedroom. They come to a stop at the foot of the bed, and Will turns to face him, blue eyes sparkling in the dim light.

“Let me?” he asks, his hands coming up to rest on the lapels of Hannibal's jacket, and Hannibal, with a sudden tightness in his throat, nods.

Will undresses him with slow, careful movements. The way he touches Hannibal borders on reverent, almost as if he can't quite believe that they're here in front of each other, and empathy has never been Hannibal's strong suit, but that's a feeling he understands.

Each garment Will removes is folded carefully and set aside until Hannibal is left standing in nothing but a pair of red silk boxers. For a moment, Will's fingers linger on his stomach, tracing a line along the waistband, but even with the amount of skin exposed the touch feels more grounding than arousing.

Hannibal catches one of Will's hands and brings it up to his mouth, pressing his lips to the younger man's knuckles, and Will huffs a quiet little laugh.

“I was just admiring the view,” he says, rescuing his hand from Hannibal's grasp. Almost immediately, it goes to his chest, and Will gently presses him back onto the bed. Hannibal goes willingly, laying himself out against the mattress. Will smiles down at him, a quick quirk of his lips, and ducks down to brush a kiss over his mouth before he pulls back. He takes off his own clothes quickly, stripping down to his underwear as well before throwing one leg over Hannibal's hips and settling comfortably on top of him.

Will braces his hands on either side of Hannibal's head and leans down to kiss him, slow and soft and sweet. “We should think about getting out of town,” he murmurs, his lips sliding against Hannibal's in soft, easy movements. “My translation was loose, but Jack's going to make the connection to Dante sooner or later. I'd rather not be here when he does.”

Hannibal leans up into the kiss, chasing Will's lips, but Will stays just out of his reach. Hannibal sighs. “I have,” he admits after a moment, “been thinking about showing you Florence.”

Will rears back, looking down at Hannibal with dark, glittering eyes. “Florence,” he says after a moment. “Florence, *Italy*?”

“That would be the one, yes.”

Will huffs, though the smile dancing behind his eyes belies any real irritation. “I don’t have a passport.”

Hannibal’s pulse kicks up a notch. Slowly, he reaches over to the bedside table and pulls open the drawer, aware of Will’s eyes on him as he slips his hand inside blindly to pick up the stashed passports. “You may not,” he says, turning back to Will with both of them in hand. He flips the top one open. “But a gentleman by the name of Thomas Novachek, who happens to bear a striking resemblance to you, does.”

Will takes the passport from him, frowning down at the picture of himself. He skates his fingertips over the page, his touch gentle and hesitant, and then looks back at Hannibal, his eyebrows still drawn together. “Where did you…” he begins, and then he stops, shaking his head. “No, you know what, I don’t want to know. *When* did you get these?”

“Shortly after our dessert course,” Hannibal replies, and Will’s expression smooths out with understanding. “I… I realized taking a part of you with me wherever I went wasn’t going to be enough. I wanted all of you.” Hannibal pauses, swallowing. “I wanted everything.”

Will’s smile is immediate and incandescent, lighting up his entire face. He thumbs the passport closed and reaches out, lacing the fingers of one hand together with Hannibal’s. “All right,” he says, voice soft. “Thomas Novachek. That’s not too bad. I can live with that. Who are you going to be living as in Florence, then?”

Hannibal’s other hand settles over his own passport. “My papers are under the name of Marcus Novachek.”

Silence settles between them, made heavy by the look of utter disbelief on Will’s face. Hannibal waits, patiently, and after a moment Will licks his lips and lets out a slow, even breath.

“Hannibal.”

“Yes, Will?”

Will’s eyes narrow, unamused. “How long have we been married?”

“Our aliases celebrated their seventh anniversary this past June,” Hannibal replies, and Will’s fingers tighten around his.

“Is this really how you’re asking me to marry you?”

Hannibal takes a breath. “I suppose that depends entirely on your answer.”

For a moment, Will just looks at him, blue eyes searching. Hannibal’s not entirely sure what he’s looking for, though he submits to the search, allowing Will to look as much as he pleases. And, finally, Will sighs and squeezes Hannibal’s hand and smiles crookedly, one corner of his mouth twisting up while he ducks his head.

“Do I get a ring?”

The words are soft, almost hesitant, and entirely wonderful.

Hannibal smiles and reaches into the drawer again, this time retrieving the box with the rings. Will's eyes latch onto it almost immediately, and with the way his body is settled firmly on top of Hannibal's, Hannibal can feel the way he stiffens, his muscles tensing in anticipation.

Once again, Will is bared to him, what he wants written clearly in the lines of his face. And, for once, Hannibal does not allow himself to bite his tongue against his instinctual response to Will's love.

“Of course, *mylimasis*,” he replies, and takes Will's ring out of the box.

The band is black, polished tungsten, and stretched across a third of its circumference in a neat, straight line are nine blood-red rubies. Each of the 1/3 carat gemstones are sunk into the ring, bringing the tops of them flush with the surface of it, and in the dim light of the bedroom, they almost do look like little drops of blood.

Without a word, Will holds his left hand out, and Hannibal complies with the silent request and slips the ring onto his finger.

For a moment, they both look at it, sitting in stark contrast against Will's skin. And then, softly, Will sighs. “*Mylimasis*,” he says, voice thick. “What does that mean?”

Hannibal takes a steady breath, reaching up to stroke his hand over Will's cheek. “Beloved,” he murmurs, and Will's expression goes soft around the edges. He reaches for the box Hannibal set aside, his lips curving into a smile when he lifts the lid and finds the second ring, a golden twin to the one on Will's finger. One of his hands captures Hannibal's, and the other takes the ring, and then he mimics the gesture Hannibal just completed and slips the ring onto Hannibal's finger.

And then his lips find Hannibal's, and Will kisses him.

“Yes, Hannibal, I'll marry you,” Will murmurs against his mouth. After a moment, he leans back, just far enough to meet Hannibal's eyes. His own glitter, something dancing behind them as he smiles. “On one condition.”

Hannibal arches one eyebrow. “I'm listening.”

“No picking up hitchhikers in Italy, all right?”

Something catches in Hannibal's chest, and his hands come to settle on Will's thighs, a gentle, grounding touch. “Not even if you're hunting with me?”

Blue eyes blaze above him, but after a moment, Will laughs, a soft, helpless little thing. “Two serial killers in one car?” he asks, and Hannibal, helpless in his own right, leans up and kisses the smile off his face.

“I like our chances.”

Chapter End Notes

aaand that's a wrap for *altered souls*! I'm totally not crying about posting this last chapter, I don't know what y'all are talking about...

but seriously, thank you again for all the love you've shown me and this fic <3 my welcome to this fandom has truly been the warmest, and I'm thrilled to be here :)

(P.S. Thomas Novachek is the name of Hugh Dancy's character in *Venus in Fur*, which is something y'all should Google if you haven't already. nsfw warning, though ;))

(P.P.S. this is what I imagine [the rings](#) looking like, if you're curious - Will's in black and Hannibal's in gold. and yes, there are 9 rubies for the 9 circles of Hell in Dante's *Inferno* because we all know Hannibal is way too into symbolism and also 0% subtle.)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!